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Adlet

A young boy who calls himself the strongest man in the world. He fights with a mastery of various secret weapons.



Nashetania

Though she is the princess of the large kingdom Piena, she is a wild and free girl, full of mischief. She is the Saint of Blades.



Fremy

A girl whose cool indifference won't allow others to get close. As the Saint of Gunpowder she uses guns and bullets in battle.



Goldof

A young knight completely devoted to Nashetania, he wields a giant spear.



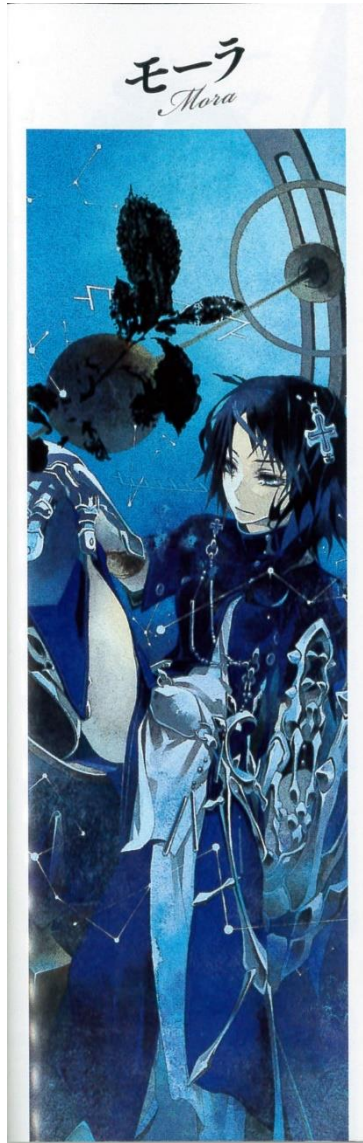
Chamo

A proud girl who is called the most powerful warrior of the current age. She is the Saint of Swamps.



Hans

A strange man who mimics a cat as he talks. He fences with an unworldly and peculiar skill.



Mora

An extremely serious and intellectual woman. She serves as the leader of the Saints and is the Saint of Mountains.



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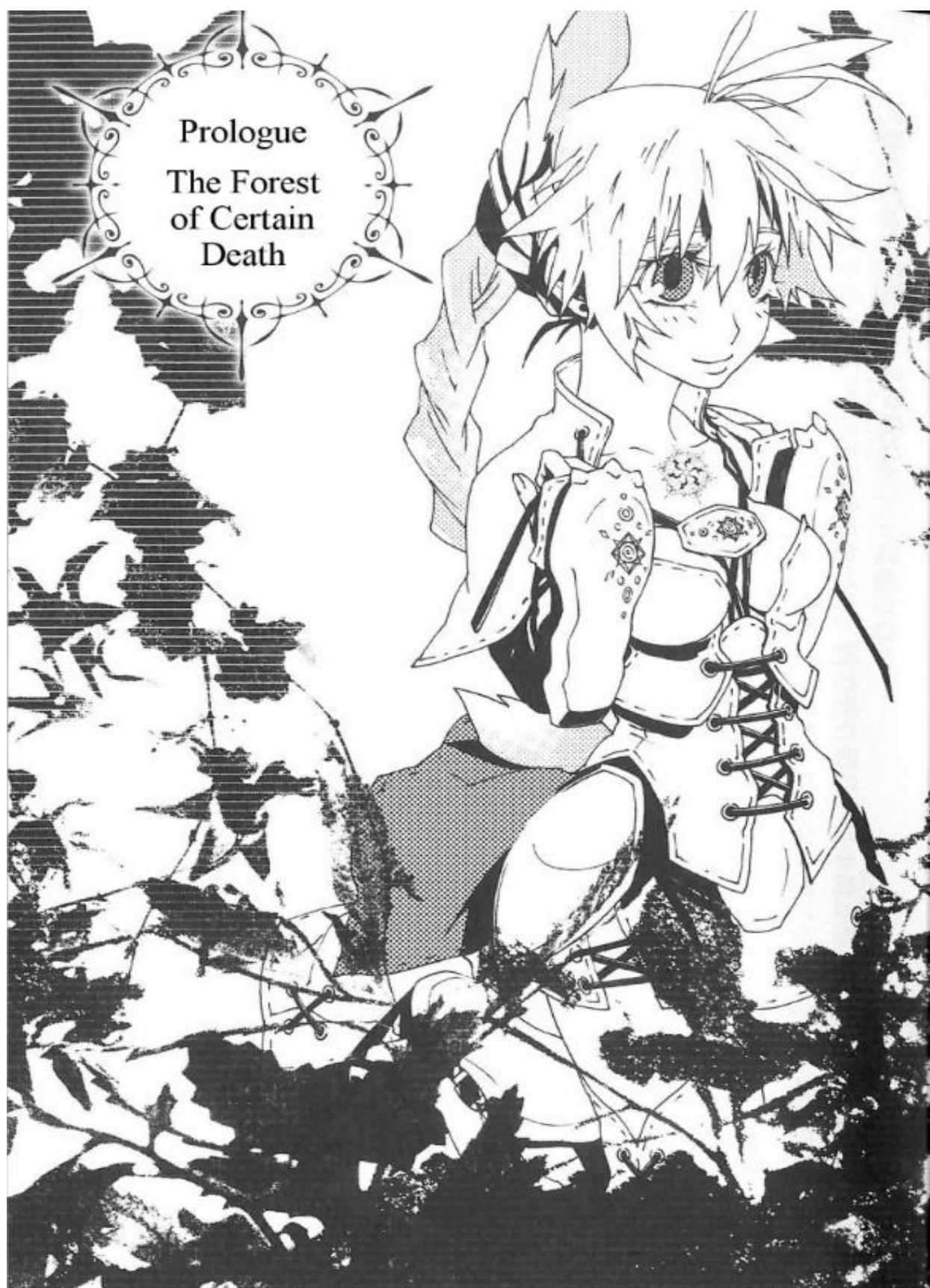
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Prologue

The Forest of Certain Death

According to legend, at the time when the demon awakes from the depths of darkness, a time when the world would transform to hell, the goddess of fate would choose six heroes and bestow them with the power to save the world.

The following tale is the story of the heroes fated to bear the task of saving the world.

However, in telling their story there is one important point to remember: Only six people would be chosen to save the world. Not five, not seven. Only six.

#

A boy ran through a forest shrouded in a deep fog. He was a young swordsman with long red hair flowing behind him as he moved. Above his hempen clothing he wore light leather armor and an iron forehead protector. The sword in his right hand, though somewhat small, was sturdily made.

But one aspect of his attire that was particularly noticeable were the four thick leather belts wrapped around his waist and all the countless small pouches fastened to them.

"Haa...haa...haa..."

The boy had been injured. His hempen clothes were ripped all over, exposing sharp cuts on his skin. His leather armor was scorched and both of his hands had burn marks. In addition, blood spilled down his body and stained his shoes a deep red. They were wounds that would have taken out an ordinary man.

The boy's name was Adlet Maia and he was 18 years old.

Adlet looked back over his shoulder while he ran. The fog and the thick leaves obstructed the light and made the center of the forest dark. But looking towards the thick dark fog he could see the faint silhouette of a human.

It had been following Adlet. In fact it closed the distance to within thirty meters of him.

This is bad. The moment he thought that, a voice echoed through the forest.

"There!" the shout came from a woman, her voice like a soft, high-pitched baby bird.

"Shit!"

At the same time as he heard her speak a blade sprung out from under Adlet's feet. Though it was about three meters of white steel it suddenly sprouted out from the plain ground. The tip was aimed precisely at his heart.

Adlet swung the sword he was holding in a reverse grip and the quartz adorning the pommel of his sword just barely managed to block the tip of the attacking blade. Adlet's body was flung backwards from the recoil and the attacking sword shattered into pieces.

Tumbling backwards he thrust his sword into the ground, then using just the power of his arms, lifted his body up and jumped. The next instant three blades sprung up from the ground to attack. Their tips only grazed his body.

"Did I get you?" his female pursuer asked.

"How optimistic. You'll have to be stealthier than that if you want to finish me off," Adlet replied as he landed on the ground and immediately resumed his escape. His pursuer's figure faded into the fog to the point where he could no longer see her.

"Try harder! Do you really think you can catch the strongest man on Earth like that?"

"You're so stubborn," the girl shouted as she continued her pursuit.

As he ran, Adlet applied pressure to his right arm. Truthfully, he hadn't been able to completely repel all of her attacks before. And now his upper arm was torn open with blood dripping down. So, acting like he was composed and calm was just him bluffing to the best of his ability to hide his injury.

Adlet looked to the back of his right hand while he ran. A strange crest was engraved into the skin. It was about the size of a baby's palm and in the center of the elaborately decorated circle was a flower with six petals. The crest was deep red and it was giving off a faint glow.

Looking at the crest Adlet muttered, "How can I be killed? How can one of The Heroes of the Six Flowers be killed in a place like this?"

The thing Adlet had on his right hand was commonly called the crest of the Six Flowers. It was proof that he was one of the heroes chosen to bear the fate of saving the world.

#

According to legend, a terrible magical demon slept at the western ends of the continent. Stories say its body was repulsive and its strength was beyond imagination. Murdering humans was the sole purpose of its existence. If it were awoken from its sleep even once then it would command tens of thousands of its underlings called kyoma¹ to lay siege to the continent and thus turn the world into hell.

That demon had no name; it was simply known as The Majin.

¹ Literally "Evil Demons"

According to legend when the Majin awakes from its long slumber the goddess of fate will choose six heroes. And on the bodies of the chosen would appear a crest in the form of a flower.

Only these six would be able to defeat the Majin, and no one else.

Adlet Maia was one of the chosen heroes. And he would embark on a journey to defeat that evil demon. He would meet his companions who had also been chosen by fate and all of them would venture towards the Majin's resting place.

But...

#

"You still haven't given up?" shouted the voice of his pursuer from behind him.

Adlet was desperately running from both her and the swords rushing upwards in attack beneath his feet. But all the blood loss was causing his vision to blur. His fingertips were growing numb and his legs were tripping up under himself. However, that didn't mean he stopped running. If she caught up with him he'd be killed.

Why is this happening? Adlet thought.

In truth, right about now he should have been invading the domain where the Majin slept.

Since it was their duty, he and the other companions chosen by fate should have been battling the kyoma together. But now Adlet was being pursued by a girl and she was about to kill him.

"Now!" The girl shouted and then proceeded to launch attacks at Adlet in rapid succession, the blades grazing his hair and ripping his leather armor.

A sword approaching from directly in front of him caused him to bend down to dodge. Then immediately after he stood and continued his dash, another sword attacked from directly beneath him. He rolled to the side to avoid it.

Though the attacks didn't have a specific target, they were ferocious. And of the tens of swords that attacked him, every once in a while one or two managed to catch Adlet. And each time he avoided an attack the gap between the blades and his body gradually decreased.

Suddenly two blades rushed towards him, one coming from his left and the other from his right. Of the two, one managed to bore into his side. As the force broke his ribs, his body was flung aside causing him to tumble across the ground.

As blood gushed up from his throat, he pressed down on his side and managed to lift his body into a crouch. He couldn't even stand anymore.

His pursuer had already approached to the point where they could clearly see him.

"...At last, I got you."

The figure of a girl appeared from the shade of the engulfing mist. She was gorgeous. Her body was clad in white armor and the hilt of the rapier² in her hand was inlaid with jewels. On her head she wore a helmet with ears fashioned in the shape of a rabbit's.

She had bright flaxen hair, large red eyes, and full lips. She was a beautiful girl with distinct features. And he could sense her nobility and grace from just seeing her standing in front of him. Everything about her, from her appearance to her attire was gorgeous.

"Nashetania..." Adlet called the girl's name.

He knew who she was. On her chest was the same crest as was on his right hand, the crest of the Heroes of the Six Flowers. Nashetania was also one of the six chosen to defeat the Majin.

And now Adlet was about to be killed by a companion he should have been fighting alongside with.

"Nashetania, listen..."

"To what?"

² A relatively long sword with a very slender blade.

"I'm your companion."

Nashetania grinned, and then aimed her rapier at Adlet. The blade extended and pierced through Adlet's ear.

"What nonsense are you saying now?" Nashetania laughed, but her eyes looked like she were staring at some kind of vermin.

"You're a fool. However if you surrender and confess then I could give you a quick death."

"I'm not going to confess. I didn't do anything wrong."

"It's no use. I won't be fooled by you anymore." Nashetania sighed silently.

"You caught us in your trap. You deceived us, hurt us. But now I understand clearly that you're an imposter."

"I'm not lying. You are being deceived. The enemy is using you to try and kill me," said Adlet, but his words didn't seem to reach Nashetania's ears.

"I didn't kill my companions. And I didn't set a trap for everyone."

"I'm sure I just said I won't let you deceive me any further."

"I'm not deceiving you at all. Listen, Nashetania! I'm not the seventh."

The blade of Nashetania's thin sword extended, its tip pointed at Adlet's heart.

"Wrong. You are the seventh."

#

Legend has it when the Majin awoke from its long slumber and threw the world into crisis, the goddess of fate would choose six heroes. A crest in the shape of flowers would appear somewhere on each of their bodies. Only they could defeat the Majin and protect the world. No one else.

But...

A seventh person bearing the crest of the six flowers had also appeared.

Each of the seven certainly appeared to possess genuine crests. But Adlet knew why there was one person too many. Among the seven, one was an enemy. They had slipped into the group in order to trap and kill them. However, who in the world among the seven was the enemy? To that question Adlet still had no answer.



Chapter One

The Departure and the Two Encounters

Three months prior, Adlet Maia was in Piena, an affluent country located in the center of the continent. It was the biggest country on the continent. And when it came to its size, population, military power, wealth, and everything else, no countries were superior. The royal family's influence resounded throughout the continent and it was natural to say that in reality they not only ruled their territory but the entire continent.

At the time Piena's royal capital was holding a fighting tournament before the gods, an event they held once a year.

As the biggest country in the world, naturally the scope of the tournament they held was also the largest in the world. The participants were diverse from Piena's knights and infantry men of honor to representatives from the surrounding countries and well known mercenaries. Saints also came, claiming to have been bestowed with the power of the gods. Free warriors and people who boasted about their power in the city streets also participated.

The doors were opened to all humans and the number of tournament participants exceeded 1500.

However, Adlet Maia's name was not on the tournament list.

#

"It's the semifinals! From the west camp and belonging to the affluent nation of Piena; the head of the monarch bodyguards, Batwal Reinhook."

An old knight with grey-streaked hair appeared from the west side of the temple grounds, accompanied by applause that filled the area.

"And from the east camp and belonging to the deep green nation of Toman; a representative of the brown bear mercenaries, Kuato Guinn"

A warrior strongly resembling a giant came out from the east side. The cheers for him were comparable to those for the West's old knight.

After a month the tournament was finally drawing to a close. There were only three participants left, and only two more matches. As for the spectators, over 10,000 filled the arena.

The arena itself was at the center of a temple located beside the royal residence. Actually, it was safe to say the arena was the very reason the temple for the goddess of fate existed in the first place. And at the south entrance of the arena stood a statue of a goddess holding a single flower, benevolently watching over the two warriors.

"Both of these warriors' names are known across the land. Yet, this is not an ordinary final. Not only will this match take place before the great ruler of Piena, but in order to ensure the preservation of peace within our world, the match shall also be held in the presence of the goddess of fate. As appropriate for a battle before a god, I hope for a fair fight."

The prime minister of Piena faced the warriors and explained the rules, but the two warriors weren't listening. They simply glared at one another intensely. And gradually, even the spectators watching the two warriors grew tenser and tenser with anticipation.

This competition held a special meaning.

There was a plausible rumor going around that the champion of the competition would be chosen as one of the Heroes of the Six Flowers.

"As you know, the winner of this match will face the victor of the previous tournament, Her Majesty Princess Nashetania. People who engage in foul play, in other words cowards, do not have the suitable qualifications to face the princess. Yet both of these famous fighters more than ever before..."

Piena's prime minister's instructions continued on and on. Yet during his speech, not many people seemed to notice the strange event that occurred off to the side of the arena. From the arena's south side gate, one boy approached. Even the arena guards didn't try to detain him.

The honor guards waiting behind their prime minister shifted their gazes, but they too didn't try to move. The spectators as well didn't seem to pay that much attention to him either. His demeanor was so extremely natural that it seemed like a mistake to stop him.

The boy had long red hair and wore normal clothes. He wasn't wearing any armor or a helmet, but he did have a wooden sword on his back. He also had four belts hanging from his hips, each with multiple tiny pouches fastened to the material.

The boy forced his way past the two warriors, then with a smile he said, "Please excuse me you two."

Hearing the sudden intruder, the prime minister shouted angrily, "Whoever you are! You're being extremely rude!"

"My name is Adlet Maia. I am the strongest man in the world."

The two semi-finalists stared at Adlet Maia with eyes that seemed like they were stabbing him to death....and then they turned to face him. But Adlet didn't even pay them any mind.

"I'd like to tell you about a change to the particulars of this match. I, Adlet, the world's strongest man will fight the two of you."

"You bastard! Are you crazy?"

Adlet calmly ignored the reddening prime minister. But at that moment, the spectators finally realized the unusual situation and erupted in an uproar.

"Hey all of you! Hurry up and get rid of this fool," the mercenary whose battle had been interrupted shouted to the honor guard waiting behind the prime minister.

It was at that point that the guards finally remembered what they were supposed to be doing.

Yet, the instant the honor guard brandished their clubs, Adlet broadly grinned.

"The match has begun!"

The next moment Adlet moved his hands faster than the eye could follow. Something then jumped out from his fingertips and hit the heads of the four honor guards causing them to grab their heads in pain.

"Just as I thought."¹

The boy no longer had the guards in his sights. Instead he only looked at the old knight and the mercenary standing on either side of him.

The guards however removed the stingers that Adlet had thrown at them. They were coated with a neural poison that stimulated pain. Even though Adlet had only used a slight amount of poison, it would still hurt severely for about 30 minutes.

¹ さすがだな It's a very Japanese phrase and the English equivalent "As I expected/ Just as I thought" is not with the same frequency

Finally realizing the intruder was not a fool, the honor guards and the old knight grabbed their swords at the same time. Then without hesitation the guards launched their first attack at Adlet.

If the boy tried to take on their attacks with his wooden sword, he would have certainly died instantly. But Adlet dodged the guards' attacks. Then in an instant the old knight charged him from behind. However, moving faster than the eyes could see, Adlet reached for one of the small pouches at his waist. From it he pulled out a tiny bottle and chucked it behind him.

The old knight deflected the bottle with the center of his blade. The contents were just water, but it created a sufficient opportunity. The old knight and the guard kept their distance and assembled themselves in a pincer formation in front and behind Adlet. If it were an ordinary fight that situation would have certainly meant certain defeat. However for Adlet, it was the chance he needed to secure his victory.

Adlet drew out a paper package from one of his pouches and threw it to the ground. The next instant it exploded beneath his feet and smoke shrouded Adlet's body, making it seem like he disappeared.

"Who in the world is he?"

"He's a trickster!" The knight and the mercenary both shouted in surprise at the same time.

Of course they were not people who would lose to an ordinary trickster. But Adlet's movements were fast. And incredible.

Within the smoke, Adlet retrieved his next tool from one of his pouches. As the two lost focus and became flustered in the smoke, Adlet completed his preparations for their defeat.

First Adlet leapt towards the old knight. As the boy moved, he drew the wooden sword from his back and went to strike the old knight's back.

"Weak!"

The moment the knight deflected his attack, Adlet let go of the sword. He then grabbed both of the old knight's arms and drew their faces close. Next he struck his teeth together.

Perhaps for a moment the old knight saw the flint Adlet had inserted into his mouth. But then a spark accompanied by a spray of high proof alcohol spewed out from Adlet's mouth and burst into flames.

"Gaa," the old knight screamed as fire sprayed across his face.

At the same time, while still holding the old knight's arms, Adlet reversed his position then chucked the knight over his shoulder². The knight slammed to the ground on his back and stopped moving.

Soon after Adlet turned to face the remaining mercenary behind him, but he didn't move to attack. His attack was already completed.

² The Japanese specifically reads "Judo throw"

The smoke from the smokescreen bullet was clearing up gradually. And within the smoke the mercenary was crouching. He was grabbing his leg and yelling in anguish.

"I'm sorry. The poison needle probably hurts. You probably wish I had defeated you with a different secret weapon."

Adlet knitted his eyebrows and boldly laughed.

Where Adlet was before, there were many large drawing pins³ scattered about. Since they were painted the same gray as the arena grounds, it was hard to see them without straining one's eyes. And like his previous attack, the needles on the drawing pins were also coated with the same pain-inducing neural poison.

Most likely it was when the mercenary ran through the smoke in an attempt to attack him from behind that he stepped on those pins. If the mercenary had been wearing steel shoes or a sturdy leather shoe, then he could have easily defended against the attack. However, Adlet had closely taken notice of the knight and mercenary's footwear when he'd approached. And since moving quickly was an important consideration for his work, the mercenary was wearing shoes made out of cloth that were light and easy to move around in.

"However you look at it, I'm the winner!" Adlet shouted, but the spectators just stared blankly in silence. Perhaps they couldn't believe what they'd heard. They couldn't believe that the two warriors who were vying for the top of the tournament were defeated by a nameless intruder in under ten seconds.

³ A drawing pin is like a large thumb tack.

"Wha...what are you doing?! Come quickly! Surround him! Surround and capture him," a panicked prime minister shouted to the soldiers surrounding the area. But without it even needing to be said, the soldiers removed the hoods from their spears and ran towards the center of the arena.

As the soldiers were about to attack Adlet, the boy shouted towards the statue of the goddess overlooking the battle.

"My name is Adlet Maia! I am the strongest man in the world! Can you hear me goddess of fate! I won't let you get away with not choosing me as one of the Heroes of the Six Flowers."

The soldiers rushed towards Adlet and as they did so the spectators finally realized what had happened.

"Royal Guards! Draw your swords! Seize that boy!" But the spectators didn't only shout; some even rushed into the arena.

Meanwhile the defeated old knight and the mercenary stood and again faced Adlet.

After that the holy battleground where people display their strength before the goddess of fate turned into the scene of an uncontrollable massive brawl.

And from that day on, Adlet Maia's name was known throughout the world. He was known as the intruding trickster Adlet, the foul-playing warrior Adlet, and the worst candidate for the Six Flowers in all of history.

Part Two

A thousand years ago, a single evil entity appeared in the continent.

Humans didn't know much about its existence. Where did it came from, why was it born? What did it think about, what did it seek to do? Or did it have a will or thoughts in the first place? Humans didn't even know if it were a living creature or not. All they knew was that it suddenly appeared without any warning.

Only a few people survived their encounters with that being. According to their testimonies the entity was some ten-odd meters tall. And they said its body had no set form, like living, moving mud. Poison spewed from its body, and the acid from its tentacles dissolved everything it touched as it began its attack on mankind. Yet the being did not want to eat humans, nor did it want to torment them; it just went around killing them for the sole purpose of killing. And as parts of its body were cut off, those parts came to life as its followers, which killed even more people.

The being didn't have a name, after all it wasn't necessary to give it one. There was nothing similar to it anywhere in the world.

So the evil entity was simply called The Majin.

At the time, the continent was ruled by the great immortal empire Rohane. But despite assembling all their troops for battle, even they could not defeat the Majin.

Nations were destroyed, royal families died out, and towns and villages disappeared in flames. People despaired and accepted that they were fated to be annihilated. But then from somewhere a single Saint came along.

That Saint faced the Majin with a single flower as her weapon. Though she was female, she was the only person in the entire world who could fight the Majin. It was a terribly long battle, but eventually the Saint drove the Majin into the outermost corner of the west and defeated it.

But when the Saint returned she said that the Majin didn't die and one day it would wake from its slumber and probably transform the world into hell. The Saint then predicted that when the Majin awoke, six heroes who had inherited her power would appear. They would have to send the Majin back into the depths of its slumber at any cost.

On the bodies of the six chosen warriors would appear a crest in the shape of a flower with six petals. And because of that fact, the people call the six The Heroes of the Six Flowers.

In the past, The Majin awoke from its slumber twice. But both times as predicted the six warriors appeared and sealed it away.

There was one condition to be chosen as one of the Heroes of the Six Flowers. Potential selectees would have to display their power at temples¹ devoted to the goddess of fate, which were built by the Saint who held the single flower. There were 30 such places in the continent and the number of people who came to show their power easily exceeded 10,000.

¹ Literally: sacred place

When the Majin awoke the strongest among them would receive the crest of the Six Flowers. For a warrior, it was the greatest honor to be chosen and every warrior dreamed of being selected as one of the six. Adlet was no exception.

The time of the Majin's revival was said to be near, the signs of which had been seen for many years. At the latest it would occur in a year, but at the earliest it could happen tomorrow.

#

"...Are you reflecting on your actions? Are you now thinking that you did something wrong?"

It had been three days since the semifinals and Adlet was in a jail for serious criminals. In front of the cell bars stood the prime minister looking at Adlet with a sour expression, as if he'd swallowed a bug.

Adlet was seriously wounded. His head, shoulders, and both of his legs were wrapped in bandages while his right arm hung in a sling. That was to be expected though since there was no way he could be attacked by that many people and come away unscathed.

Adlet sat on the cold bed and faced the prime minister. "I should have said this before, but I did want to officially enter the tournament.

However, whether it was because of the rules or something, I wasn't allowed to enter no matter what I did," Adlet complained.

The tournament before the goddess had rules and the weapons a person could use were restricted. Even strategies such as trick attacks or surprise attacks were banned. But Adlet couldn't do anything about that.

"As you are aware², I am the strongest man in the world, but those rules were the only thing that posed a problem for me. So because of that, I realized it couldn't be helped and I allowed myself to ignore them."

"What is your objective?"

"It should go without saying. My goal is to be chosen as one of the Heroes of the Six Flowers."

"Did you say the Six Flowers? You? Are you saying someone like you deserves the honor of being one of the six?"

"I will be chosen. It's already been decided. After all, I am the strongest man in the world."

² Adlet uses an honorific phrase to convey this information, however we don't really have a polite way to say "As you know" without adding an uncertainty phrase.

Adlet laughed and the prime minister banged on the cell bars. *This old man lacks self-control.*

"...Well then, you haven't reflected on your actions at all."

"I am reflecting. Really. The honor guard and the arena guards....I'm thinking of all the injuries I gave them."

"How do you feel about all the disorder you caused in the holy arena?"

"I couldn't care less about that," Adlet said, causing the prime minister to draw his sword.

He then tried to smash open the lock, which his body guards desperately tried to stop him from doing.

"Listen here, I refuse to take this anymore. I'm going to hang you for sure. You can count on that!"

The soldiers managed to subdue the prime minister and together they left the area in front of the jail cell. Adlet then sprawled onto the bed and shrugged at all the trouble.

He recalled the fight he had three days ago with the old knight and the mercenary. Both of them were terribly strong. If just one of his tactics had gone wrong then Adlet would have probably been the one who was defeated.

Nevertheless, he had been able to win. Even if the fight had been crude, he was still able to win. That was enough proof that he was the world's strongest.

"...Still, there is one thing I regret," Adlet mumbled as he rolled over in the bed. It was princess Nashetania.

Nashetania Louie Piena Augustra. The first princess of the affluent nation Piena. Although her noble blood meant that she was heir apparent with the highest claim to the throne, she was also Piena's strongest warrior. As a Saint who received their power from the god of blades, he'd heard that she can create swords out of thin air at will.

Nashetania had won the previous tournament and it had been decided that the victor of the match Adlet had intruded upon would fight her in the finals.

Adlet wanted to try and fight her. And if he couldn't, then at the very least he'd wanted to try and see her face.

When he'd defeated the old knight and the mercenary, he'd wondered if there were a chance that she would show up, but in the end she didn't.

Well, it didn't really matter at all, he thought, sighing once.

"Ah, I found you," said someone standing in front of the cell bars. The voice and the person it came from were completely out of place in the bleak prison.

"...Who are you?"

It was a beautiful blonde-haired girl. And as if just looking at him put her at ease, she showed a lovely smile. She wore a black maid outfit, but it didn't suit her at all. Maid outfits suited more plain looking girls.

"Mr. Adlet right? ³ I'm sorry, but could you come this way?" the girl beckoned him over repeatedly with her hand.

Confused, Adlet sat up and turned to the bars. As he drew closer to the girl, a sweet apple smell touched his nose. As it was something he'd never smelled before, he thought the fragrance was mesmerizing.

"Please shake my hand." Unexpectedly, the girl stuck her hand through the bars.

"Huh?"

"I'm truly sorry for the sudden intrusion, but I had the opportunity to see your fight three days ago. I was so moved by your performance that now I've become your fan."

"....Huh?....Huh?" With the girl's scent dissolving his train of thought, that meaningless word was the only thing he could respond with.

³ Adlet-san. I changed San to Mr. to sound less Japanese.

"Please shake my hand. Handshake."

Adlet did as he was told and lightly grabbed the girl's outstretched hand.

Then as the girl squeezed his hand in return she said, "Mr. Adlet, you're very nervous. Is this perhaps the first time you've ever grabbed a girl's hand?"

The girl then covered her mouth and laughed teasingly. In response, Adlet let go of her hand in a rush.

"Wha, what are you saying. I'm calm. I've held hands many times."

She giggled. "But your face is so red."

As she laughed, Adlet felt like the apple scent were getting stronger and stronger. He then turned his blushing face away from her and covered his cheeks.

"Are you terrible with girls, even though you're so strong?"

"Say what you will, but Adlet Maia is the strongest man in the world. The world's strongest isn't terrible at anything."

"...I'm glad I came. You really are interesting after all," the girl said with a smile. "I don't know anything about you Adlet. So, would you mind telling me about yourself?"

Adlet nodded. The apple-scented girl had an impish smile. *Come to think of it, I haven't heard her name yet*, Adlet thought suddenly.

Adlet Maia was going to turn eighteen this year. His hometown was in a small nation located in a remote region to the west. It was called Woro, the country of the white lake. Due to certain circumstances he left his home village when he was ten. He had no lover nor friends. And since he was very young, he had no family in the entire world.

For a long time he was secluded in the mountains with his master, training day and night to be able to defeat The Majin. He polished his sword skills, trained his body, and studied how to use and make each of his secret weapons.

The unique fighting style he wielded was the result of combining his swordplay with the various secret weapons at his disposal.

He didn't belong to any place and he didn't follow anyone's commands. He just continued to train as an independent warrior with the sole purpose of defeating The Majin. That was Adlet's history. People who lived by the sword usually belonged to the knights or the mercenaries. So if they went to battle they would earn money and fame. However, Adlet had no interest in either of those things. His objective was fighting The Majin; that was it. There were only a few genuine unfettered warriors like him in the entire continent.

After finishing his long training he descended the mountain and tried to enter Piena's fighting tournament in order to confirm that he was the world's strongest. And that was everything he told the girl.

The apple-scented girl enthusiastically listened to Adlet's story. But he had no idea what exactly she thought was fascinating.

"...and so that's why I went to the tournament, to show the goddess of fate that I really am the strongest man in the world. I'm sorry. I realize that most of that was boring."

With those words, Adlet concluded his story and the apple scented-girl responded with an applause. At first he had felt awkward, but gradually he had gotten used to talking. And in the end having the cute girl listen to his story actually made him happy.

"It was interesting. I'm glad I pushed myself to come meet you after all. Somehow I feel like I've heard the phrase "world's strongest" enough times to last me for life."

"That's right." 'The world's strongest' was Adlet's favorite phrase. Whenever he talked about himself he absolutely added it into the conversation.

"It's a solid fact that I am the world's strongest, so I plan to boldly say it whenever I can."

"...but is it alright to simply name yourself the strongest? Have you even beaten princess Nashetania yet?" The girl said the words with an air of provocation, but Adlet didn't pay any attention to her challenge.

"She is considerably strong. But I am stronger."

"There are still many strong people in the world."

"Of course, but I don't believe there exists anyone stronger than me."

"...Mr. Adlet, what is your basis for believing that?"

"I know that I am the world's strongest. That's it."

"That's it?"

"I know. The goddess of fate knows. As for the rest, The Majin and the people of the world, I'll just have to show them."

"Really? That's incredible confidence."

"It's not confidence. It's a clear fact."

The girl smiled, but at the same time she seemed troubled over how she should reply. Well, confusion probably couldn't be helped, Adlet thought. This was the girl's first time meeting the world's strongest man after all.

"By the way, is it alright if I ask one more question?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"In a bit I want to break out of this prison. Do you have any good methods?"

"You want to leave this place? What for?"

This girl has guts, Adlet thought, having expected a slightly different response.

Adlet told the girl how Piena's prime minister was clamoring for the death penalty. Adlet being in jail couldn't be helped, but execution was a problem. The girl then touched her chin while in thought.

"I think it's alright. Mr. Prime Minister was angry, but I don't think he'd go so far as execution. What you did is not a reason for a person to die."

"Is that right? Then it's no problem."

Adlet was relieved since in his current condition it would have been a bit difficult to break out the prison.

"What happened at the tournament afterwards? Was it stopped?"

"No. Your actions...weren't counted. Yesterday they held the match again and the mercenary Kuato ended up winning the semi-finals by a very narrow margin. Then Nashetania completely defeated him in the finals."

Did she just address the princess without an honorific, or was that just my imagination?

"That's unexpected. Did the mercenary really win? I thought the old man had a slight edge on him."

"It seems that when you threw Mr. Batwal you injured his shoulder."

"Perhaps his mistake was taking it easy on me."

After that Adlet and the girl had some trifling, idle talk, chit chat. They talked about how people were too scared to stand when they looked at Piena's royalty and the problems with the high cost of goods. The girl was frank so talking with her was easy. And just having a conversation itself was exciting.

"Ah." The girl's face suddenly grew serious, as if she'd just recalled something. "I forgot that there was something I came to talk to you about. And this is not the occasion for idle chatter."

"What is it? You seem upset."

The girl caught her breath, and then in a whisper asked, "Have you heard of the Six Flower killer?"

"What's that?"

"There was a knight from the country of the yellow fruit by the name of Matola Wichita. Have you heard of him?"

"Ah, I know the name."

In the world there was a lot of gossip about who would be chosen as one of the heroes. However, among that gossip there was a name that he'd heard repeatedly. It was the name of a young prodigy said to be the greatest archer in the world.

"Have you heard of Asley, the Saint of Ice from Foudelka, the nation of the gold sands?"

Adlet nodded. They were both names of well-known warriors.

"What happened?"

"...They were murdered. The criminal is unknown."

"Could it be the Kyoma?"

"Perhaps."

The living creatures that served the Majin were called kyoma and they were preparing for the Majin's revival, secretly plotting to ambush and kill the six heroes. They were hidden all over the continent, conducting various schemes. Plus they were going around killing whoever it seemed would be chosen as one of the Six Flowers.

"...things like the Kyoma are not creatures that can be easily defeated. How in the world do you defeat them?"

"I don't know."

"That's troubling."

"Mr. Adlet, I think perhaps it's better if you stay here. No matter where you go the danger won't change, but at least the prison is under considerable heavy guard."

"That is true. Well then, I'll stay put until my injuries heal."

As if she had finished telling him what she needed to, the girl nervously shifted her gaze away.

"I'm sorry. I should be going, but I feel like I'll make you angry by leaving. Well, you're already angry, but you'll be even angrier."

"I don't care. Go."

She quickly nodded up and down, but when she started to leave, Adlet restrained her.

"If you meet the princess tell her this for me. She will surely be chosen as one of the six as well. So tell her that I'm looking forward to the day we can fight together."

"...huh?" The girl opened her mouth absentmindedly. Then for some reason she started to giggle.

"What is it?"

"Nothing, sorry. I'll tell her for you. If I meet her that is..."

The girl started to walk away, then looked over her shoulder and stuck out her tongue.

"Mr. Adlet. You are quite an idiot."

He was thinking about asking her back what she had meant, but she was already gone. So for a while Adlet pondered what she'd said, but realizing that he couldn't figure it out he decided to forget it.

Adlet lay down on the bed and looked up at the ceiling, thinking about the so-called six flower killer.

"...Six flower killer huh? I'll probably have to fight them after I'm chosen."

Up until then Adlet had displayed a bright, optimistic expression. But now, his eyes were full with a silent anger.

Part Three

Exactly as the girl had said, he had been given an unfixed prison sentence as his punishment.

Well, if that's all they were thinking then he wasn't going to object. Instead he would remain alone in his cell and wait for his wounds to heal.

Several days later Adlet found a large sword hidden in his bed. It was probably for protection if the need arises. But he had no clue whether that girl secretly had the sword placed in his cell or if some other "fan" of his had done so.

A month passed, then two. During that time Adlet continued to train in his cell so his body wouldn't fall out of shape. However, the Six Flower killer or whatever, never came.

By the time the third month passed his wounds were completely healed. So soon after, Adlet started to think about escaping.

But one night a sudden pounding in his chest woke him up. His entire body was hot, and his heart was seething in an indescribable agony. Then after about ten seconds, a faintly glowing crest appeared on his right hand.

The Majin had awoken. And Adlet had been chosen as one of The Heroes of the Six Flowers.

"What the..." Adlet muttered as he gazed at the crest.

"It happened so quickly and unexpectedly."

He'd imagined his entire body would be enveloped in light or that the goddess of fate would show herself and command him to defeat The Majin.

He couldn't help but feel kind of disappointed as he stared at the crest. However, before long he realized this was not the time for such feelings.

"Hey! Somebody come!" Adlet shouted towards the guards as he banged on the cell bars. If they knew that he had been chosen as one of the six then it was only natural that they probably wouldn't be able to keep him in the cell any longer. However, he couldn't do anything about the guards not coming.

"Is there no one here? I've been chosen as one of the Six Flowers."

The inside of the prison was unusually dead silent. He couldn't even sense the presence of any of the guards. However, the moment he thought that there was no other choice but to escape, suddenly he heard a giant commotion coming from the floor below him.

"Why would you come to this kind of place? What in the world kind of business could you have here?"

"Batwal. Hurry up and please don't interfere."

He remembered both voices. One was the apple-scented girl. *And wasn't the person following her the old knight I'd fought in the arena?* Those weren't the only sounds he heard though. Behind them he could also hear the noisy sound of multiple footsteps.

"Mr. Adlet. Have you been chosen?"

The girl rushed up to Adlet's cell. She wasn't wearing the maid outfit she'd been in a few days ago, but a luxurious white armor. And a rapier¹ hung from her waist. She was also wearing a helmet with ears in the shape of a rabbit's. He'd heard somewhere before that making helmets with an animal motif was a tradition of the Piena royal family.

And so the moment he saw her, Adlet realized her true identity. He also understood just how much of an idiot he was. Adlet smiled bitterly, as if that second revelation were something he noticed regularly.

Then the girl in front of his cell said, "Long time no see. Allow me to formally introduce myself. My name is Nashetania Louie Piena Augustra. I'm Piena's first princess and the current Saint of Blades."

¹ Literally: Thin sword

The apple scented girl...Nashetania lowered the armor on her chest and revealed the crest of the Six Flowers near her collarbone.

"And now I've been chosen as a Hero of the Six Flowers. I look forward to working with you."

"As Adlet Maia, the strongest man in the world, I feel the same." Adlet showed her the crest on his right hand.

"Princess! What in the world are you doing! You don't have time to be speaking with someone like him."²

Adlet showed his crest to the old knight as well. His eyes widened at the sight, and then he fell silent.

"Let's hurry up and go. Our time is limited."

Nashetania unlocked the jail cell and Adlet stepped out. Then the two of them ran off without listening to the old knight's pleas for them to stop.

"Let's use horses," Adlet suggested.

² The knight is shouting politely. It almost seems like a contradiction, but that is the beauty of Japanese Honorifics, something that is difficult to translate to English.

"This way!"

The two of them jumped out a window and landed on a lawn. There, someone who seemed to be Nashetania's actual maid led out two horses with an unsure hand.

"Be very careful," the maid said.

"Right," Nashetania replied. "Let's go."

Nashetania and Adlet mounted their horses and rushed away. The old knight and the soldiers were shouting behind them. Perhaps they were clamoring to have a ceremony for Nashetania's departure, or maybe they were shouting to have an audience with the princess, or possibly they were just shouting about some other inconsequential matters.

Looking at Nashetania's profile as she rode beside him, Adlet smiled. This girl seemed to have managed everything successfully. And as if she were thinking the same, she looked to him and smiled.

#

A thousand years ago, a woman called the Saint of the Single Flower defeated The Majin and sealed it. She sealed it in the farthest land to the west in a land called Balca Peninsula. Today it was part of the Iron Island nation of Gwinvarell.

The peninsula was a mouth to the continent in the shape of a flask. It was decided The Heroes of the Six Flowers would gather in that location. Each warrior was definitely informed of that when they displayed their abilities at the various sacred places before the goddess of fate. And no matter where in the world the Six Heroes originated from, if they waited at that location they would all eventually meet up.

But even after The Majin awoke, it would take a while before it regains its former power. This was the time the six heroes had to find a way to arrive at the furthest section of the Balca peninsula and seal the Majin again before it regained its full strength.

But there were over 10,000 Kyoma assembled, waiting for the six heroes on the peninsula. Since only the six could enter the designated location, it would probably be a long and painful fight. In the past two battles over half of the heroes sacrificed their lives in those conflicts.

However, those chosen to be the Six Heroes did not fear death.

The voices of crying Kyoma filled the vast territory of the Balca Peninsula. And as a result the land wasn't often called its official name. Instead, it was commonly referred to as the Wailing Demon territory.

#

After leaving the kingdom of Piena, the first thing Adlet and Nashetania did was stop by Adlet's hidden home. In the abode he had prepared a bunch of equipment and tools for his journey. So, he stuffed various secret weapons into the small pouches at his waist. Then he strapped a large metal box to his back which held a large amount of bombs, poison, and hidden weapons³. These secret weapons were essential for defeating the Majin and without them Adlet couldn't call himself the strongest man in the world.

The iron box was strong and heavy to the point where the average man would run out of breath just carrying it on their backs. However, it didn't feel very heavy to Adlet.

After getting the supplies, the two of them rode out on their horses for a day, leaving Piena and entering Fandawen, the country of the yellow fruit.

"They aren't following us anymore."

".....they probably gave up."

Adlet and Nashetania looked behind them as they talked. They were discussing and looking for the party from Piena's royal palace that had been pursuing Nashetania.

"Aren't you being a little cold? They're probably your own followers right?"

³ 暗器 Anki here refers to small weapons that are hidden on one's person. The common examples are shurikens and kunais which are used by Ninjas.

"That's right, but at any rate they're annoying."

There was no need for Adlet to use honorific speech with Nashetania. It was intended for them to serve as completely equal companions. Nashetania also seemed to agree with that prospect.

Feeling concern for their exhausted horses, the two decreased their pace a bit and followed a city road. There were orchards extending across the lands all around them. Exactly as it was named, Fandawen was a country where one could pick delicious fruit.

"Pretty. This is my first time seeing orchards."

"Is that right?"

Nashetania seemed to be enjoying herself while she looked over the surroundings. Though it was quite an ordinary sight for Adlet, for her it was probably quite the novelty. Then at that moment a horse-drawn cart full of lemons made its way towards them.

"Excuse me, is it alright if I have one?"

What is she doing?

Without waiting for the driver's response, Nashetania grabbed one of the lemons. She then squeezed it and sucked out the delicious looking juices.

"That was delicious, thanks for the treat."⁴

She then wiped her mouth and threw the leftovers at the driver. Adlet had already realized it before, but that action only reaffirmed how strange the princess was.

"All things considered, the land is peaceful," Nashetania said as she licked the juices from her hand. "I was thinking The Majin's awakening would be a much larger kind of event."

"That's just how it is. The world was also at peace the last time the Majin awoke and the time before that. In fact, the only disturbances that occurred were near the Wailing Demon territory," said Adlet. "But it will stop being peaceful if we fail."

"That's right. So, let's do our best."

From far up the street another horse cart came, this time stuffed with carrots. Nashetania again swiftly jumped off the horse and grabbed one of the carrots without asking for permission.

⁴ The Japanese phrase ごちそうさまでした (Gochisosama deshita) is very Japanese and doesn't really have an English equivalent. The Japanese say this ritualistically at the end of every meal. It is a set cultural phrase and as such it doesn't always convey a sense of gratitude.

He was thinking there was no way she'd eat it raw, but then she did something to disprove his theory. A thin white sword formed in the air and cleanly peeled off the carrot's skin in an instant.

"Is that the power of the god of blades?"

"That's right. It's incredible huh? But that's because I'm the Saint." Nashetania puffed out her chest as she took a bite out of the carrot.

"I can even do things like this." As she said that she raised her index finger.

A blade sprung up from the ground. It was over five meters in length, thin and terribly sharp. It could pierce through both humans and Kyoma with no difficulty.

"But this..."

She pointed her index finger at Adlet. Blades about 30 centimeters long materialized around her finger. Then one by one the blades attacked Adlet's face.

"What are you doing, you idiot!"

"Can't you dodge an attack like this?"

Cackling, Nashetania continued to fire the short blades at Adlet. Though he dodged the simple attacks, inside he was shocked by her power. It was the power of the Saint of Blades.

Saint was a general term for warriors who commanded supernatural power. Fewer than eighty even existed in the whole world and all of them, without exception, were women.

The Saints were said to become the same as the gods that governed the fate of all creation. And since the gods resided within their bodies, the Saints could borrow their power and wield abilities beyond those of regular humans. As for Nashetania, of all the various gods, she had the god of blades within her.

Only one person held a particular god at once. And so at the moment there was no one other than Nashetania who borrowed the power of the god of blades. If she died she would relinquish the power of the god and someone else would be chosen as the Saint of Blades. Other than Nashetania as the Saint of Blades, there was also the Saint of fire, ice, mountains, and various other Saints possessing different powers. Probably some number of them were chosen to be one of the Six Flowers.

And in the past, the Saint of the Single Flower who had defeated the Majin had possessed within her body the goddess of fate.

"Cut it out!" Adlet grabbed one of Nashetania's flying blades and threw it back at her. It struck her helmet then fell to the ground.

"Sorry, I got carried away."

"Yeah, you definitely did."

"Are you mad?"

"I'm completely furious."

Nashetania's spirits fell and with a gloomy expression she dejectedly chewed on the raw carrot.

I probably shouldn't have gotten so angry, Adlet regretted.

"...I'm sorry," Nashetania said with a depressed voice that was completely different from how she'd spoken before. "I'm a bit of a strange girl. My father and even the maids are always mad at me."

"No, it's no big deal."

"People like me probably cause similar trouble wherever they go."

There's something I can't quite grasp about this girl. She'd appeared at his jail in a maid's outfit and screwed around with him at the roadside. And though he was a bit angry about the latter, it was strange that she felt so down because of it.

This is a problem. How was he supposed to connect with her? Adlet grabbed the reins of his horse and hung his head in shame. The two then advanced their horses without a single word passing between them.

Wait, why is the strongest man in the world getting hung up over something so trivial, he thought. But the moment he was about to talk to her, he noticed her gazing at him from the corners of her eyes.

"Perhaps you thought I was genuinely sad."

"Hey!"

Nashetania put her hand to her mouth, a ridiculing smile showing on her face. He'd forgotten this girl loved playing tricks.

"Ahahaha, you're fun after all."

"Shit. You had me worrying over nothing."

"Rest assured. I don't get sad so easily."

Adlet looked away, smacked his horse's rear with a whip and dashed away, leaving Nashetania behind.

"Please don't be angry. I was just screwing around."

"Truly."

"But please don't get the wrong impression. I'm usually gentler. It's just today I'm showing my happiness."

"From now on we're heading to fight The Majin. Do you get that?"

"I understand. It's just this time really. Forgive me." Smiling, Nashetania lowered her head. "This is my first time. And even though I understand there will be a battle after this, I can't control myself."

"First time for what?"

"Being with someone like you."

Nashetania's expression changed from a prankster girl's mischievous smile to the kind smile of someone who felt affection towards another. She was a girl of many smiles.

Adlet quickly started to feel awkward.

"You're the first person I can talk with equally, the first person I can talk with honestly about what I'm thinking about and how I feel."

Going beyond awkward, Adlet started to feel embarrassed. He then decided to look at her briefly out of the side of his eye. And though he had thought that maybe she was just having fun teasing him, it didn't seem that was the case by looking at her.

"Ah, a horse cart. Let's have another carrot."

Whether she knew what he was thinking or not, Nashetania started to chew another raw carrot. Adlet simply shrugged and watched.

Part Four

For the rest of the day, Nashetania continued to do as she liked. And soon the day darkened and night came. The two of them rested their horses by the side of a road and prepared to sleep outdoors. Growing up in a royal palace, Adlet wondered if Nashetania would be able to handle the camp, but she said she had done it multiple times before, so it wasn't a problem.

After Adlet prepared his sleeping bag, he surveyed his surroundings for any blind spots or places where a person could be secretly lurking. He had to always prepare for attacks.

"What's wrong?" Nashetania asked him, though with her eyes closed it looked like she was sleeping. She was definitely carefree.

"Well, before you go to sleep there was something I wanted to ask you. What happened with the Six Flower killer?"

"Come to think of it, I haven't told you." Nashetania's face clouded. It didn't seem like it would be very good information. "I didn't mention this before, but actually half a year ago Goldof went on a journey to pursue the killer."

"Goldof...that's a knight from your kingdom."

He knew the name. Goldof Aurora, the head of the black-horned knights. He was boasted as a young prodigy by the Piena royal kingdom's army. And he was considered to be Piena's strongest knight, on par with Nashetania.

"Unfortunately, I didn't hear any good news. Our last contact was over a month and a half ago; just a few words without any clue as to their current situation."

"Maybe they were killed by their intended victim."

"That didn't happen!" Nashetania unusually raised her voice. "Goldof is strong. I've never beaten him."

"What about last year's competition?"

Nashetania was the champion of last year's tournament before the goddess. And if she fought Goldof in the finals then the result of their moral struggle should have been Goldof's defeat.

"At the very end he took it easy on me. It couldn't be helped. We both had our positions after all.

However, it wasn't that disappointing because I made him promise me something. He promised that he wouldn't die so that one day we would be able to have our rematch. And so because of that promise, Goldof will not die. He cannot die."

After thinking for a moment, Nashetania added a single word to the end.

"...Probably."

"Do you have faith in him or not?"

"I have faith in him, but he's a little young. He's only 16."

"Young huh? We're not in a position to say that," Adlet said. Adlet was 18, and he'd heard that Nashetania was also the same age as him. They were both a bit too young to be carrying the fate of the world on their shoulders.

"Though Goldof is strong, I still have a few doubts."

"That's wishful thinking. Well anyway, did he find any clues about the killer's movements?"

"Yes. Since about a month and a half ago, Leura, the Saint of the Sun's whereabouts have been unknown."

"Leura? The Saint of the Sun?"

He knew that name too. She was a living legend, possessing the power of the sun god.

About 40 years ago, some woman had displayed that power in a war. From the heavens, burning rays of light rained down on the castles besieged by the enemy and reduced them to ashes. It is said that that single woman brought down over ten castles. After getting older she must have served as the leader who governed over the Saints. But by now she must have already retired from that position.

"She's famous, but she's probably not of fighting age, right?"

"Right. She's already over eighty. No matter how strong she is, I don't think her body can handle the battlefield anymore."

"That's strange, don't you think? There should be other people the killer is seeking. Me, you, Goldof, Chamo of the swamp... There are still many strong warriors scattered around the world."

"Even I think it's strange, but...." Nashetania shrugged. Even if they discussed it further, they probably wouldn't understand it any better.

"That's enough. Should we go to sleep? We'll learn about the killer sooner or later."

"Sooner or later?"

"We'll fight them for sure."

"Do you think they are probably a Kyoma? Or could they possibly be human?"

"I don't know."

Nashetania went to sleep and Adlet held his knees to his chest and closed his eyes. It was a posture he used to rest his body and mind while on guard.

The rest of that night passed without any event. As did the next day and the next. However, the very fact that nothing was happening made Adlet certainly feel uneasy.

#

The two of them journeyed for ten days. It was a pressing ride and they had to trade their horses multiple times along the way. During that time they never slept longer than three hours a day. If they hadn't, and if it had been a normal journey, then the distance would have taken thirty days to travel.

At the end of their long journey they finally passed the border of Gwinvarell, the iron islands where the Wailing Demon territory resided. Their path wound through the valley of a rugged mountain and there were thick forests surrounding them.

Gradually, rumors of The Majin seemed to be increasing within the people's gossip. And as they approached the Wailing Demon territory, the expressions on the people they saw became more and more grim.

Then when they actually entered the nation of the iron islands they noticed what looked like many families fleeing with their belongings.

"...Let's hurry."

As he had expected, Nashetania's bubbly expression was completely absent as they moved further and further towards their destination. The girl had a naive personality, but she wasn't a fool.

"Pay attention. The Kyoma will probably launch their assault at any time now."

"How do you know that?"

"The enemy plans to strike before we assemble. It was the same for the previous Six Heroes."

"You're well informed."

"My teacher drove information about the Kyoma into my head. Their species, their habitat, their weak points, and even their hypothetical behavior."

"I'll be depending on you then."

The two of them continued further down the road. As they advanced the number of words Nashetania spoke decreased. Soon she fell completely silent.

Unable to bear it any longer, Adlet spoke. "Nashetania."

She didn't respond. Her expression as she handled the reins looked full of thought.

"Nashetania!"

"Yeah, what?!"

"...Are you nervous?"

Her hands holding the reins were pale. She let go of the leather and wiped her sweat onto her thighs. Sweaty palms were proof that she was losing her composure.

"Relax, the fight hasn't started yet."

"R...right, but then why am I so nervous?"

Adlet had a single question that came to mind. "Up till now have you ever been in actual combat? Do you have any real experience killing people?"

"About that..."

None, huh, Adlet thought. It probably couldn't be helped. Though imperfect, she was the princess of an entire country.

"...Adlet, do you really think I'm strong? Perhaps until now everyone has just taken it easy on me," Nashetania said as she stared at her sweaty palms.

"Relax. Don't think like that."

"If I can't relax even when we haven't actually encountered the Kyoma, then..."

She was trembling, as if all of her screwing around up till yesterday had been a lie. No, maybe it was more that all of her cheeriness up till yesterday was an attempt to mask her unease.

But Nashetania wasn't a coward. Everyone felt nervous before their first time on the battlefield. No matter how strong a person was that fact never changed.

"Nashetania, smile."

"Huh?"

"Smile. First do that and the rest will follow."

Looking at her palms Nashetania said, "I can't Adlet. If I can't even stop my hands from shaking then smiling is..." As she said that she lifted up her face and looked at Adlet.

Then Adlet lifted up his nose with his fingers and squeezed the air out of his cheeks.

Nashetania made a strange sound, then held her hand over her mouth and looked away to the ground.

"See, you laughed. Do you feel any calmer?" Adlet asked.

Nashetania stared at her hands then measured the pulse on her neck. "I feel a lot better. Thank you."

Looking at Nashetania's expression, Adlet nodded. She was okay. And though she was still inexperienced and naïve, at her core she had the essence of a great and fully-fledged warrior.

"That was the first thing my master taught me. To laugh."

"You had a good teacher."

I wonder. Adlet shrugged.

For the moment their destination was the entrance to the Wailing Demon territory. However, their first objective was to assemble all of the Six Flowers.
Though there probably are many ordeals waiting for us before that happens.

Then at that time a man holding a child and a woman with an injured leg came running towards them from far up the road.

"What happened?" Nashetania dismounted from her horse and neared the two. The woman clung to Nashetania and started to cry.

"We tried to run! The Kyoma, before they came we tried to run..."

"Please try to calm down."

The woman was wailing to the point where she couldn't even speak. So instead, Nashetania looked over to the man.

"Our village intended to run away to the capital with the soldiers. But, on the way the Kyoma attacked, and we had to leave...our companions...and even our youngest child..."

As the man spoke, Nashetania's hands again began to tremble slightly. Adlet placed a hand on her shoulder and said quietly, "Be calm. With your strength there is nothing that you should be afraid of." Afterwards Adlet whipped his horse into a dash. "Nashetania, follow me!"

"Oh, okay."

Adlet gripped his horse's reins tighter and contemplated the situation. It was exactly as he had predicted. The Kyoma were burning the nearby villages and attacking the people in order to lure each of the heroes out and crush them. The same tactic had claimed the life of one of the six in the previous conflict.

If he only thought about victory then the correct plan of action would be to ignore the attacks. But Adlet figured being correct should just go to hell. Why was he fighting the Majin if not to protect people?

"There!"

Fourteen Kyoma were attacking a group of horse carts. They were about ten meters tall and looked like leeches. One horn and multiple antennae sprouted out from their heads and at the tips of those antennae were eyes very similar to a human's.

While the Kyoma were only a single type of living creature from a single genealogical tree they could change their form in an infinite amount of ways.

There were the ones in front of him that looked like leeches, but there were also Kyoma that resembled giant insects, birds, and animals. In fact, there were even ones who looked like humans and could speak.

But the one thing they all shared was a horn growing out of their heads. That was it.

There were tens of soldiers fighting the Kyoma side by side with farmers and their families. And there were also many injuries and a number of people who were dead. Seeing the scene, Adlet jumped off his horse and charged towards the Kyoma.

"I'll hold them! Then you finish them off!" Adlet shouted to Nashetania who was running behind him. He then instantaneously drew an iron bottle from one of his small pouches, removed the lid, and poured the contents into his mouth.

Some of the Kyoma that were watching Adlet as he approached lifted up their heads and spewed liquid in his direction. But he did a somersault over them to dodge their attack. And when he landed he sparked the flint in his front teeth.

The contents of the bottle were a specially treated composition of flammable alcohol, so the spark created a stream of fire that blew out from his mouth and lashed at the Kyoma's faces. Though the flames should have been weak enough to be brushed aside without sustaining any injury, the Kyoma however started to writhe in agony.

Just as I predicted. This type of Kyoma is weak against fire.

Adlet's secret weapons themselves mostly didn't have any considerable power. That's why he used many of them. And in attacking the Kyoma's weak point they proved their worth.

"Nice!" Nashetania shouted.

Then, using the power of the god of blades, Nashetania summoned three blades from the ground, each impaling a Kyoma and killing it. The remaining seven were still attacking the farmers without paying any attention to Adlet or Nashetania.

Adlet promptly took out his next secret weapon, a small flute. He then held that in his mouth and blew.

".....?"

No sound came out, however all the Kyoma attacking the villagers simultaneously turned towards Adlet. The flute produced a special sound wave that drew their attention.

The Kyoma proceeded to attack Adlet, but he calmly dodged their attacks. As they came at Adlet, Nashetania didn't miss her chance and pierced five of the Kyoma with her blades, killing them. Adlet then finished off the remaining two with his sword.

And just like that it seemed the battle was over. It didn't even take one minute to dispatch the rest of the Kyoma.

"Huu," Adlet panted. Though he wasn't tired, he was sweating. That hadn't been his first battle, but actual combat was still tense.

"...Haa...Haa..." Nashetania was out of breath.

Adlet put a hand on her shoulder and said, "You were perfect. It didn't seem like your first battle at all."

"I could fight more calmly than I thought I could. So I too should be useful from now."

"I'll be counting on you."

Nashetania smiled.

The two of them then went and helped the soldiers administer aid. The villagers were piling the corpses of their companions onto horse carts. But seeing other people die was painful; as was seeing the faces of children left alone after their parents' deaths.

"Is this everyone? Was anyone left behind?" Adlet asked as he administered aid.

As if it were difficult to answer, some of the men Adlet was speaking to looked to the ground and some exchanged a quick glance with Adlet.

"What happened?"

"About that..." The villagers were hesitating to speak, so soon Adlet surmised the information.

"Someone was left behind."

"Trav...a travelling girl came to the village alone."

As soon as one of the villagers said that Adlet jumped back onto his horse. As he was about to whip his horse in to a dash, Nashetania came and asked him in a hurry, "Adlet, where are you going?"

"It seems a girl was left behind. I'll be right back. I'm going to go check and come back"

The moment Adlet tried to spur his horse, Nashetania grabbed his wrist and stopped him.

"Please wait. Do you plan to go alone?"

"Ah right. Take care of this place Nashetania."

He tried to use the reins to whip the horse into a run, but this time Nashetania grabbed the horse's tail.

"Why are you stopping me?"

"It's no use, Adlet. You're already too late."

"..."

"There are only two of us. We can't go around helping everyone, not even the one person who was left behind."

It was a bit surprising. Nashetania seemed to be looking at the situation calmly.

"Of course, you're right."

"It's unfortunate, but we have to abandon that girl and continue onwards."

Nashetania looked to the ground with a sad expression. Probably even she really wanted to go and help people. However, Nashetania's opinion that defeating the Majin took precedence was correct.

"...Defeat the Majin. Save human lives. It's difficult to do both."

"Even I find it painful. However, we should consider meeting up with the other Flowers our top priority."

When Nashetania removed her hand, Adlet whipped the horse with the reins. The horse then neighed and rushed off.

"Sorry, but you have to allow me to go. I am the strongest man in the world, after all!"

"What is that supposed to mean!?"

Defeating the Majin and helping people. *I can do both because I am the strongest man in the world.* At least that's what Adlet murmured within his mind.

Part Five

After making his horse run for about thirty minutes, Adlet started to see the fence surrounding the village. The journey had been quiet. Not one human, Kyoma, or animal had shown themselves.

The village was as still as death. Either the Kyoma still hadn't come or they had already finished their task and left...or it was a trap. Adlet dismounted from his horse, drew his sword and walked cautiously.

The village gate was abnormally laid on the ground. There were also corpses of Kyoma that resembled giant serpents. They were big and according to his studies were far stronger than the leech Kyoma he'd defeated a while ago.

Adlet approached the corpses and surveyed their conditions. Each head had been cracked by something with unbelievable power. He probed the wound of one of the corpses and found an iron pellet about 2 centimeters in diameter buried within.

"...A slingshot? No, could it possibly be a gun?"

Adlet craned his neck to the side. Guns were miniaturized cannons that were invented about thirty years ago. They had spread a bit across the land since then, but it was still difficult to say they were powerful weapons. Taking down helmetless people or wild boars were the best guns could do. And he'd never heard of a gun that could kill a Kyoma.

Adlet entered the village and saw the corpses of even more Kyoma scattered about. Each had been taken down with a single shot, blowing out either their heads or their hearts.

Then it dawned on him. The travelling girl, who was left behind in the village, hadn't been left behind at all. She had fought with the Kyoma there. For a lone warrior to travel here at the time when The Majin awoke from its slumber could only mean one thing.

He proceeded to look around for the girl. But after checking inside each house and looking around the village grounds with no success, he decided to walk over to a nearby charcoal-making hut at the edge of the village.

"...Oh."

The girl was there. He raised his hand and tried to speak; however, his hand stopped halfway and his voice got caught in his throat. It was like Adlet's entire body froze the moment he saw her.

The girl was walking in front of the rotting hut. She appeared to be around 17 years old or so and was wearing a worn out cloak. Her hair was white and she was clutching a small puppy in both of her hands. As she walked, she lovingly caressed the scruff of the dog's neck.

With just a glance Adlet knew she was the one who had defeated the Kyoma. Plus there was a gun sticking out the opening of her cloak. But at the moment those things meant nothing to Adlet. Though she was only holding a puppy, that mundane sight was enough to freeze Adlet completely.

"I've found him."

There was another dog tied to a stake in the ground in front of the hut. *Perhaps it was the puppy's parent.* The girl lowered the puppy in her arms to the ground and it started to jump about the dog that seemed to be its parent. And while the puppy wagged its tail in a playful manner, the girl pulled out a knife from her breast pocket, sliced off the parent dog's collar and freed it.

"The Kyoma won't attack anything except humans. So live here and be at peace."

The parent dog and the puppy gamboled about the girl's knees then bound off, disappearing into the forest. All the while Adlet stared transfixed at the scene, completely rooted to the spot.

She was a beautiful girl. Her face was a little child-like with an eye patch covering her right eye. Her left eye however was so blue it seemed transparent. Though the edges of her eye beautifully curved downward slightly at the corners, her gaze was cold¹.

¹ たれ目 or Drooping eyes is considered to be beautiful in Japanese culture. So perhaps the author here is trying to create a contrast between her beauty and her cold attitude.

Her cloak was made of leather and beneath it she was also wearing leather clothes that clung tightly to her skin. There was also a black cloth wrapped around her head.

Just by looking at her Adlet understood that the girl was powerful. Her movements were flawless and finely honed, like a sharpened blade. And from her appearance he could surmise that she was a highly trained warrior.

The sight of her even made him feel like his heart would stop if he got any closer.

However, the manner in which she'd used her hands to pet the puppy confused him. She had wrapped her hands around the puppy's back and seemed to have been imparting her warmth with the animal. It was like those gentle hands were showing the puppy exactly what love and affection were.

The girl stared quietly at the forest where the two dogs had gone. Her gaze and her expression appeared to be terribly temporary, like a flower about to wither or a star about to fall. Looking at her, it seemed like her entire existence was fleeting.

Adlet couldn't fully understand her. She was cold yet she was warm. Terribly strong, but at the same time weak. And those contradictory first impressions bewildered him.

"Who are you?"

The girl turned towards Adlet, causing his heart to jump. His mind went completely blank and he couldn't think of anything to say. He even started to hear the sound of his heartbeat in his ears.

It wasn't that he was shocked by her beauty. Nor was he very emotionally moved so it probably wasn't love. He just didn't know what he should do, which meant that he couldn't do anything but be flustered.

"Do you like dogs?" Adlet finally squeezed out a trivial question.

The girl stared at him with her mouth open, an expression he recognized as disgust.

"I like dogs, but I hate humans."

"...Is that so? I like both."

"Who are you?" She said, withdrawing the gun from beneath her cloak and aiming it right between his eyes. Adlet completely forgot to feel a sense of danger. "Have you also come to kill me?"

On the back of her left hand was the crest of the Six Flowers. And with the gun still pointed at his face, Adlet stared absentmindedly at the girl's face and the crest.

"I'm going to attack, okay?"

At those words, Adlet came back to his senses. In a rush he raised both his hands, showing that he did not have any hostile intentions.

"Wait, don't shoot. My name is Adlet Maia. I'm one of the Six Flowers, just like you."

As he showed her the crest on the back of his hand, she stared at him suspiciously.

"I've heard of you. The cowardly warrior from Piena's fighting tournament. According to the rumors you are a genuine low life."

Her words confounded him. "Wa...wait, who said those things? I am the strongest man in the world. I'm absolutely not some cowardly warrior," he said while trying to calm his racing heart.

"You're one of the Six Flowers? I can't possibly believe that."

He didn't feel any gentleness or vanity coming from the girl pointing the gun at him. All that was there was a cool-headed, wary and genuine warrior. And the girl's attitude was causing Adlet's confusion to vanish like mist.

"It's the rumors that are more mistaken. I use every method to win, and that's not cowardly."

"..."

"I am Adlet, the strongest man in the world. Cowardly men cannot be called the strongest. So don't point your gun at me."

Adlet spoke with confidence, but the girl only looked at him with a dumbfounded expression, giving no indications of lowering her weapon.

"...Do you have any other companions?"

"Nashetania is nearby. You probably know her. She is Piena's princess and the Saint of Blades."

"Nashetania...right. So that girl was also chosen, huh?"

The girl still didn't attempt to lower her gun, even though Adlet was sure he had dispelled any idea that he was an enemy. With her cold gaze she continued to stare his way. She wasn't even addressing him as someone who she would fight alongside with from then on out.

"Tell this to Nashetania and the others you will meet."

"...What?"

"My name is Fremy Speeddraw. I'm the Saint of Gunpowder."

The Saint of Gunpowder. It wasn't a phrase Adlet was used to hearing. The gods resided in all things and governed over the fate of all creation. However, he'd never heard of gunpowder, its god, nor there being a Saint of it.

But he was more interested in why she thought that was important to tell the others.

"I will not travel with you. So allow me to fight the Majin by myself. And since I don't want you all to be a hindrance to me, do not get in my way."

"What are you saying?"

"Are you deaf? I'm saying you and the others and I will go separate ways. And as I said before, don't get in my way."

Adlet was speechless. Wasn't it exactly because they were supposed to combine their powers that there were Six Heroes? What could one of them possibly do alone?

"Tell them that exactly. You should be able to at least do that kind of errand right?"

After saying that, Fremy lowered her gun, turned around and dashed away. She was quite fast.

"Oy, wait!" Though he told her to wait, there was no reason to expect she would. And before he knew it, Fremy was gone.

"Shit!"

Adlet surveyed his surroundings. He saw the horse he had rode on coming towards him and took out a knife from his breast pocket. He then carved into the saddle, "Nashetania. I met one of our Six Flower companions. I will follow her. Don't worry about me, and just continue towards the designated location."

After making the horse run towards the outside of the village, Adlet looked out in the direction Fremy had gone.

"Wait! Where are you going Fremy?!" He called out to her, but there was no response. So, Adlet followed her and ran into the forest.

#

Anyone who ran through a forest would leave tracks. And if someone were to follow the broken twigs and trampled leaves left behind then it shouldn't be too difficult to track the person who made them. And so Adlet continued to run after her, climbing mountains and descending them.

But Fremy's footprints were often suddenly interrupted. It seemed like she was running while getting rid of her tracks. It was the running technique of someone used to escaping.

"What's with this girl," Adlet muttered while searching the area with a telescope. He spotted the faint silhouette of a moving human and ran in that direction.

There were times when he thought that he should just give up on his pursuit and go back. Plus he was worried about Nashetania, who he'd left behind. Nevertheless, Adlet continued to follow Fremy. His warrior's intuition was ringing and it seemed like his mind was murmuring to him, "You have to follow her." For some reason he believed that she absolutely shouldn't be alone.

He spotted Fremy's back as she ran deeper into the forest. It seemed that somehow Adlet's foot speed was faster than hers. And if that were true then eventually he was going to catch her.

And sure enough, after chasing her for an hour, Adlet finally circled in front of the girl.

"That's enough."

"...I can't believe it. You caught up with me."

The two glared at one another, as they both worked to catch their breaths. Then Fremy pulled out her gun and aimed the muzzle at Adlet.

"I already told you what you should tell them. Don't follow me anymore."

"...What do you mean?"

"If you come after me any further I will shoot."

A simmering anger started to well up from the bottom of Adlet's stomach. Even more than the fact that what she was saying was utterly selfish, he was angry that she had come to the point where she was going to shoot him.

"Stop screwing around idiot. What are you thinking? You can't possibly defeat The Majin alone."

"You're a nuisance. Step aside."

"Sure you defeated the Kyoma before, but the Majin is different. We'll probably lose if all six of us don't combine our strength and fight together.. Are you such an idiot that you don't even understand that?"

"I can fight by myself. I can win by myself. If you need proof, I'll show you."

"Ah? What do you plan to show Adlet, the strongest man in the world?"

Fremy placed her finger on the trigger and in response Adlet dropped the iron box on his back and shifted his hand onto the hilt of his sword. He couldn't quit here.

For a short while the two just stared at one another. Of course it didn't seem like even Fremy actually intended to start a fight here. They were just engaging in a test of endurance to see who would back down first.

"At the very minimum, tell me why. Why do you want to fight alone? You should tell that to all of us."

"I can't."

"Why?"

Fremy fell silent.

"Say something."

She didn't answer.

"I'll tell you now in advance, I'm persistent. Until you answer I will follow you around. After you answer, I will still follow you around until you say where you're going. The world's strongest man is also the worst when it comes to giving up."

"You're a strange man. What could you possibly be the world's strongest of?"

"Why are you going alone? Why won't you meet the other Flowers? I won't let you do anything if you don't answer."

Fremy maintained her stare, but her teeth were grinding together and the finger she had on the trigger was shaking. Eventually though she lowered her gaze and quietly said, "Without a doubt I'll be killed if I meet the others."

Adlet was speechless. However, though he couldn't believe what she'd said, he could see that she was quite serious about it.

"Idiot. Aren't we all the same Heroes of the Six Flowers? Why would we kill our important companion?"

"I don't want you to include me as one of your important companions or whatever."

"Why?"

Fremy's gaze suddenly grew cold. It was completely different from the glare she'd been giving him up till then. It was a gaze that promised she was prepared to shoot.

"If I tell you the reason then you too will try to kill me."

Adlet paused for a moment to think. If he pressed any further they would end up killing one another.

"Choose. Do you want to kill each other after hearing the reason or do you want to kill each other without hearing the reason?"

"..."

"Or do you want me to be quiet and leave this place?"

Adlet returned his sword to its sheath and picked up the iron box from the ground. Looking relieved, Fremy also lowered her weapon.

"I will fight The Majin alone. You do as you wish. But if possible, I don't want to meet you again."

Fremy tucked her gun back into her cloak and turned her back on Adlet.

Was it really okay to let her leave like this? He asked himself, before giving his own answer. *No, it is definitely not okay.* And with that baseless conclusion, Adlet moved and fiercely threw himself at Fremy.

The instant she turned around Adlet threw down a smoke pellet. Then within the smoke he wrested her bag away from her.

"What are you doing!?"

"You said to do as I wish. So allow me to do just that."

"...return my things."

Fremy again grabbed her gun, but Adlet was clutching the bag he'd ripped from her to his chest. There were probably bullets or cartridges to load into the gun within. There even seemed to be a map and some light food inside.

"Are you screwing around or are you just an idiot?"

"I'm not an idiot, nor am I screwing around. I've made up my mind. I will accompany you."

"...Huh?"

"Now if that's settled, let's go quickly." He gave the dumbfounded girl a sidelong glance as he passed her.

"What's settled? Give me back my stuff!"

Fremy's expression changed from confusion to anger. She placed her finger on the trigger.

"...Sorry, but if you attack I will end up fleeing with your bag. If that happens it would be a problem for you."

"...Do you want me to shoot you?"

"Or do you want to take back your things and escape? You should know from earlier that you can't get away."

"What the hell are you thinking?"

Adlet paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. Then, he spoke slowly in an admonishing tone.

"I have no idea what your circumstances are, but you seem to be in a tight spot. In solitude, you are going towards the Wailing Demon territory, the place where The Majin and Kyoma are waiting. Furthermore you seem to think that you'll be killed if you meet the other Six Flowers. By the general standards of society, it seems like you're stuck between a rock and a hard place."

"So?"

"I'm not someone who will leave a companion alone if they're in a tough spot. The world's strongest man is kind. So, because of that I have decided to help you."

"...Are you joking? If you are, cut it out."

"Stop complaining. Now hurry up and move," Adlet said, walking past her and ignoring the fact that she was prepared to shoot him.

"...I can't believe this. What? What kind of...What kind of man is this?"

Though she was grabbing her hair in frustration, in the end it looked like she decided to come along. And without saying a word the two of them walked through the center of the forest.

Though his plan had been to simply move and let things take their course, he wondered if the current situation was really okay. He'd ended up leaving Nashetania behind. And in addition he didn't know when Fremy might seriously try and kill him.

He glanced behind at Fremy. Her expression had gone past confusion and was now even showing fear. *I guess that's fine. I'm sure we will work it out.*

"Hey, Fremy," he said facing Fremy as he spoke. "Though I don't know your situation, since there are no more than six heroes and you are one of them, I plan on protecting you for the time being."

"Be quiet and walk. You're annoying me," she spat out as she turned away from his gaze.

Part Six

“...I’m...HUNGRY! I will EAT your FLESH...and DRINK your BLOOD!”

Nashetania was fighting a giant Kyoma that resembled a wolf. Although imperfect, the fact that it could produce any form of human speech was proof that it was a powerful Kyoma. A bit of her blood dripped from her cheek.

The Kyoma tried to lift its front legs and squash her, but she intercepted and countered by causing a blade to spring up from the ground and plunge through its body.

Impaled by her blade, the Kyoma thrashed about in pain. As it did so, Nashetania wiped the blood on her cheek onto her rapier. Her sword then extended and the tip thrust into the Kyoma’s mouth.

Reflexively, the Kyoma spewed out vomit as it continued to writhe in agony.

“SAINT’S BLOOD, can’t eat...CAN’T EAT saint’s blood.”

The Kyoma ate humans. However, the bodies of the Saints like Nashetania were a deadly poison for them.

“And to think in the beginning I was scared,” Nashetania muttered. She then produced multiple swords in the air which proceeded to rip the Kyoma to shreds.

“I think I’ve even gotten the hang of fighting these Kyoma.”

The wolf-like Kyoma, now shredded in about four pieces, stopped moving.

When the battle was over, Nashetania surveyed her surroundings. The area had fallen back to silence and she couldn’t see any Kyoma or Adlet in the vicinity. Nashetania frowned in discouragement. She did find a fallen saddle, however, with a message for her carved into the leather.

"Nashetania. I met one of our Six Flower companions. I will follow her. Don't worry about me, and just continue towards the designated location."

“...What is this?”

Nashetania tilted her head to the side in confusion.

“When he said follow, he probably meant that the girl was running away. I wonder why she was running. Who in the world is this other hero?”

While she grumbled, she took another look at the village center, searching for any items Adlet may have left behind. But during her search, a large muscular man clad in black armor dashed into the village atop a black horse.

And when she finally got a look at his face, Nashetania shouted, "Goldof!"

The man...Goldof dismounted from his horse beside Nashetania and dropped down to one knee. He then removed his helmet and looked up to her face.

"Princess, I was late catching up to you."

Goldof Aurora, said to be the strongest man among Piena's knights, didn't seem to be younger than Nashetania at all. His black armor was heavy and solidly built. In addition, his helmet was fashioned with a pair of metallic ram horns. In his right hand he held a large spear with the handle tied to his wrist by a sturdy chain. All in all, he looked exactly like a dignified veteran with many years of military service under his belt. And though his expression was stern, she could still see some traces of youth in his face.

"You came as expected. I figured you had been chosen," Nashetania spoke to Goldof with a gentle voice.

"I am honored."

"I'm grateful the goddess of fate chose you. With you here there is nothing to fear." Nashetania spoke in a majestic manner, but her tone was somewhat stiff. She didn't have the same relaxed relationship with Goldof that she had with Adlet.

"Please allow me to risk this body of mine to protect you, my princess. Without a doubt, it is my intention to slay The Majin and see that you are returned to the kingdom safely."

Those words made her raise a brow.

"...Goldof."

"Yes."

"From now on you and I are equals. You won't be protecting me unilaterally; we will protect each other."

"But Princess, you are a special lady. Nothing should happen to you, even if the chance is remote."

"...Right. I know. You're right," Nashetania said, slightly shaking her head. "But more importantly, there's trouble. Another of the Six Flowers I was travelling with up until a little while ago went off somewhere." Nashetania showed Goldof the horse saddle.

He read the message and craned his neck to the side.

“I really don’t understand what it means.”

“Me neither.”

“Who was your companion that wrote this?”

“Mr. Adlet Maia. You probably have heard of him, huh?”

When he heard that name, Goldof’s expression changed. Most likely he had also heard all about the tournament.

“Don’t make that face. He is a reliable person.”

“Despite the fact that he left you, Princess, and went off somewhere?”

Goldof gave her a sharp look, as if he were wary about trusting Adlet.

“That’s why we will search for him. I wonder what direction he went in.”

Goldof seemed to ponder for a moment as he stared at the saddle's message. But he wasn't thinking about what direction Adlet had traveled. Rather, his expression seemed to suggest he was thinking about something else.

"Adlet is probably also heading towards the Wailing Demon territory. If we proceed in that direction I think we will be able to join up with him."

"That's probably the only option. Still, I'm worried if he's alright."

Without answering, Goldof held out the horse he had arrived on to Nashetania. She refused, threw the saddle back on top of the horse Adlet had used to get there and climbed on top.

As they rode their horses down the village street Nashetania said, "Goldof. Adlet is a nice person. Sure he's pretty unusual and I think at first you too will be bewildered by him. But if you talk to him, I think that after a while you'll become friends."

"...Sure."

"The world is vast and I'm glad I get to go out and travel it. There's no way I would ever have met a mysterious person like Adlet if I were in the palace."

"...I see."

“And one more thing. Teasing people is extremely fun.” Nashetania stuck out her tongue in a smile.

However, Goldof seemed to have a complex look on his face. And soon he averted his gaze and looked to the ground so that she wouldn’t see.

“With all due respect Princess...”

“What is it?”

“My princess, about....Adlet.” Goldof started to say something, but then hesitated and remained silent for a long time.

And with his face looking to the ground he fell silent for a long time.

“What’s wrong? You’re being evasive and I feel like you’ve changed somewhat in the short time we’ve been apart.”

“That may be so. I beg your pardon, Princess. Please forget what I said.”

Nashetania cocked her head to the side. Then she clapped her hands together and shouted, “That’s right. What’s the deal with the Six Flower killer? Did you come across any clues?”

Atop his horse, Goldof shook his head from side to side.

“...I am ashamed to say that my journey did not result in their death. However, I do know their name, what they look like, and their power.”

“You’ve found clues after all. Is the information correct?”

“Yes. The information came from someone who fought directly with the killer. They didn’t seem to be lying.”

“What kind of person is this Six Flower killer?”

Goldof spoke with a thick, powerful voice. “The Six Flower killer is the Saint of Gunpowder. She is a white-haired girl who uses guns. And her name is Fremy.”



Chapter 2: Part One

Adlet and Fremy continued on towards the Wailing Demon territory. Six hours had passed since the two of them first met in the village and the sun had already risen high up into the sky. They were walking wordlessly along a mountain path that only had sparse weeds growing between the rocks and pebbles. After checking their location on a map to the best of their abilities, they figured they would at last see the territory after crossing two more mountains.

“It’s somewhat hot, huh?” Adlet asked Fremy who was walking in front of him.

However, he received no answer.

“Do you know anything about this area Fremy? Is it especially warm in these parts?”

As expected, she didn’t respond.

“I’ve never heard of the Saint of Gunpowder. What kind of things can you do?”

“...”

“If you’re the Saint of Gunpowder does that mean you don’t carry bombs? I’d be happy to give you some of mine.”

“...”

“I didn’t know there was a gun that could kill Kyoma. Who made it?”

Over and over again Adlet presented Fremy with opportunities to have a conversation, hoping it would improve their relationship even just a little bit. But each time she only responded with a stone-like silence, and it was starting to annoy him. His first fleeting impression that she looked lonely had vanished. Now all he saw was a shamelessly self-centered and incomprehensible girl.

“Answer something. What do you think I am?”

“Shameless and reckless. You’re an unruly foolish man.”

“So you’re just going to answer that...” Her response took him out of the talking mood and from then on he also decided to walk in silence.

He thought about how Nashetania was probably faring. It was good to head to the Wailing Demon territory, but if she were perhaps searching for him then their reunion would end up delayed. And he was worried about leaving her all alone after all.

“If you’re worried about Nashetania then how about going back?” Fremy asked, as if she could read his mind.

“...No, I’m not worried about her. At least not as much as I am about you.”

Fremy snorted. “I didn’t think Nashetania would be chosen. If you and she are what passes as Heroes, then the current Six Flowers cannot be depended on.”

“That’s not true. Sure, Nashetania is naïve and lacks experience, but she’s a great warrior.”

“She’s arrogant, and lacks both in skill and experience.”

“As the strongest man in the world, everyone lacks skill compared to me.”

“Nonsense.”

Fremy and Adlet fell back into silence. They had crossed another mountain, which meant that after the next they would see their destination.

But as they neared the summit of that second mountain, suddenly Fremy said, “I have a request.” The sudden phrase surprised Adlet. “Would one be okay?”

“...What is it?”

“At some point you and I will kill one another. I don’t care what you think, but that will absolutely happen.”

“That won’t happen,” Adlet asserted, but Fremy shook her head.

“Please. When the time comes, take it easy on me. Even if you choose to kill me with your sword, don’t finish me off.”

“What’s with that request? The type of request I'd like to hear from you is if you can fight by my side.”

“You thought you’d hear that kind of request from me?”

“...”

“I cannot die. Not until these hands have defeated The Majin.”

After that Fremy again stopped talking. Even Adlet couldn’t bring himself to speak any further.

I cannot die. Those words contained a strong determination. However, beneath those words Adlet could also sense a sadness she didn’t seem to know how to express.

Adlet's thoughts again went to Nashetania. When he was with her the mood was bright and cheerful. But when he was with Fremy his heart started to hurt, like someone was pressing down on his chest.

"...That's the Wailing Demon territory."

The two had finally managed to reach the summit of the mountain. And they could see a vast spectacle stretching out before their eyes.

A forest extended from the foot of the mountain to the ocean. And a narrow, winding road pierced through the center of that forest. In the distance was the dark ocean and projecting outwards into its waters was the Balca peninsula, also known as the Wailing Demon territory. It was where The Majin and the Kyoma lay dormant.

Adlet pointed to the base of the peninsula.

"Our rendezvous point is where the continent and the peninsula connect."

"You and the others, you mean."

He couldn't really see the entire peninsula from the summit. Most of the land was concealed by rugged hills and sparsely dotted with forests and vegetation all over. Strangely, the entire peninsula was also dyed a dark red.

“That’s an incredible color. I wonder if that’s The Majin’s toxin.”

The Majin’s body released a unique toxin that filled the entire Wailing Demon territory. All other living creatures were unaffected by the toxin, but if it touched a human they would die within a day. There was only one method to defend against it and that was to be chosen by the goddess of fate as one of the Heroes of the Six Flowers and receive divine protection.

As long as the toxin existed, no one except the Six Flowers would be able to approach. Without it though, it would no longer be necessary for only six people to attack.

“So, what now?” Fremy asked. “I don’t want to meet the other Flowers.”

Adlet pointed to the foot of the mountain and said, “I’m curious about that fort over there.”

There was a small fort where he was pointing. Half had been destroyed, seemingly by fire. The two then descended down the mountain and arrived in front of the structure. Though the outside was damaged, there still seemed to be people inside.

Wary of the area, Fremy pulled up her hood and covered the crest on her left hand. Adlet found a soldier sitting at one of the fortress catapults.

“If the other Flowers are inside, I’m going to run.”

“...Understood.”

Adlet nodded and spoke to the soldier on the lookout. “Excuse me! Are the Heroes of the Six Flowers inside?”

“No, they came two days ago but they’ve already departed. Who are you?”

He exchanged looks with Fremy; for the time being it didn’t seem like it would be a problem to go inside.

“I’m Adlet Maia, one of the Heroes of the Six Flowers. This is...don’t worry about her.”

Craning his head to the side, the soldier descended from the lookout point and opened the gate. The two then entered the fortress and Adlet showed his crest to prove his identity.

“I’m glad you came, Hero of the Six Flowers. I have something that I have to tell you at all costs. Would you please come in?”

“What’s this about?”

"It's very important. It affects your upcoming battles."

Adlet gave a fleeting look towards Fremy. She too seemed to want to ask about the soldier's information.

"Please follow me. Ah, excuse me for not introducing myself sooner. My name is Private First Class Rowen in the Gwinvale army. I am the current commander of this fortress."

"Commander? You?" Adlet asked without thinking. Looking at the man's demeanor, Adlet understood he was fairly strong, but his rank was low and his equipment was plain.

"Everyone is dead. My commanding officer and even the general. All that's left are me and the junior officers. But there is something we have to defend to the last man at all costs."

Rowen started to walk and Fremy and Adlet followed him deeper into the fortress. Inside the stench of death hung in the air with many human corpses and a few Kyoma remains scattered about. The damage within the fortress was far greater than the damage outside.

"It's here."

At the center of the floor was a heavy iron door, and opening it revealed an underground room. Somehow it seemed that the entire fortress was made to protect that place.

With Rowen leading the way, the two traveled deep underground where five soldiers stood in a small room. An altar in a shape Adlet had never seen before stood at the center of the room.

“Is that what you said you were protecting,” Adlet asked as he pointed to the altar. But Private First Class Rowen shook his head.

“This is a replica of what we must protect. Please take a look at this map.”

A map depicting the area around the Wailing Demon territory was spread across a table in front of the altar.

“Gwinvale has prepared for The Majin’s revival and from those efforts we have devised a method to help the Six Flowers. That is what we are protecting.”

The soldier placed his finger on the continent side of the map.

“Currently the Kyoma are invading the continent in large numbers to attack the Six Flowers. I think you’ve already fought with them before.

If these Kyoma realize that you have entered the Wailing Demon territory, then they will change their course and return. Their goal is to completely eliminate all the Heroes of the Six Flowers. They think of nothing else."

"I see."

"So, in absolute secrecy the king of Gwinvale came up with a method to block the entrance of the peninsula after the Six Flowers have entered the Wailing Demon territory."

After saying that the soldier pointed to the border between the territory and the continent.

"The king borrowed the powers of the Saints of Fogs, Illusions, and Salt to set up a powerful barrier that prevents the Kyoma from coming and going into the forest. It's called the Illusion Fog Barrier."

A large circle was drawn on the map around the vicinity of the entrance to the Wailing Demon territory. It probably designated the range of the barrier.

The Kyoma couldn't cross the ocean. And even if they tried to sail there on a boat the territory's coasts were covered by boulders, meaning there were no places for a boat to come ashore. There were also Kyoma that could fly, but only a few. If the barrier could be erected around the area of that circle it would keep a considerable amount of Kyoma out of the Wailing Demon territory.

“That’s an incredible plan. So what kind of barrier are we talking about?”

“You won’t be able to enter, nor will you be able to leave. Those are the only things it is intended to do. When it's invoked, everything within the barrier will be shrouded in fog. If someone tries to leave they will feel a sense of confusion about their whereabouts and before long will turn back. Conversely, if someone tries to enter the mist from the other side they will have the same feeling and end up exiting.

“I didn’t know such a thing had been made.” Adlet gave Fremy a quick glance. As far as he could tell from her expression she too didn’t know about the barrier.

“The barrier still hasn’t been activated. After we confirm that all Six Heroes have entered the territory then we will activate it.”

“How will you activate it?”

“At this point.” Rowen pointed to a spot on the map, a slight distance away from the fortress.

“There is a holy site there where we will activate it. The temple is surrounded by a protective wall built by the Saint of Salt to keep out the Kyoma. You won't have to worry about the Kyoma breaking through.”

As he listened, Adlet couldn't help but feel a great deal of admiration for the people who had formulated the plan. It was truly magnificent.

Continuing on, Rowen pointed to the area near the entrance of the Wailing Demon territory.

“One of the Six Heroes, Mora-sama¹, the Saint of Mountains is waiting here. When she visited this fortress two days ago we informed her about the barrier and discussed our plan.”

One of the Six Heroes was waiting. Those words caused Fremy to wince slightly.

“And then?”

“When all six have assembled Mora will launch some smoke signal as planned. When we have confirmed the signal we’ll head off to the temple and activate the barrier. If we are attacked by Kyoma before all the heroes have assembled, then we’ll create a smoke signal from here when it looks like we’ll be wiped out.”

“Why?”

“When we launch the signal, we ask that one of the Heroes to please head to the temple and activate the barrier themselves.

¹ A very polite honorific.

After discussing with Mora, that was the conclusion we reached.”

“...”

Adlet fell silent. As far as he’d heard, the person who activated the barrier would not be able to enter the Wailing Demon territory from the outside. In other words, one of the six would have to withdraw from the battlefield. Even so, the barrier still seemed to have value even if they lost one of the Flowers in the process.

“At the temple there is an altar the same as this one. Please take a look at this.”

Rowen beckoned Adlet over and he stood in front of the replica. It was a simple design with a pedestal and a sacred sword in the center. To the left was a stone slab with holy writing written on the right side.

“Activating the barrier is easy. Just thrust the sword so it’s standing up in the pedestal and put your hand on the slate. Then call out, ‘Fog come forth.’”

“Got it. I’ll remember that, but activating the barrier is your and your soldiers’ job.”

“Understood. We’ll carry out our duties even if we die.”

Adlet extended his hand to Private First class Rowen and with a smile the soldier accepted his handshake. The two of them gripped each other’s hands firmly.

Part Two

Adlet and Fremy left the fortress and continued towards the Wailing Demon territory. There was about a three hour distance until the rendezvous point where Mora the Saint of Mountains was waiting.

“We’re in trouble,” Adlet said. Fremy had been completely silent since she’d heard about the barrier.

“Rowen said Mora is waiting at the entrance to the territory. And maybe Nashetania has also met up with her at the location. So it seems difficult that you’ll be able to enter the territory without them noticing.”

“Don’t speak to me. I’m thinking.”

Adlet shrugged.

“Well, why don’t we meet them once for now? After that we can think about what to do.”

“If that’s a joke, I’m not laughing. If I meet the other Flowers we’ll kill each other.”

To Adlet, that didn't seem likely to happen. There were only six companions and no matter what happened in the past, for the time being shouldn't they wipe the slate clean and join forces? For Adlet it didn't matter what kind of villain they may have been. In order to defeat The Majin he planned on accepting them as his companions.

"Of course I won't plan on being killed without a fight."

"Don't worry. If we end up fighting one another, I'll protect you."

He'd said it as a joke. After all, he had thought she'd turn him down and tell him not to joke around. However, Fremy's expression changed slightly.

"...Adlet...you..."

He felt that was the first time she'd called him by his name.

"You're a kind person."

Her saying that made him embarrassed and his face turned slightly red. He wondered if at last Fremy's attitude was softening up, but the next instant her gaze looked like a chill had gone down her spine.

"Don't show kindness towards me. It'll make me want to kill you."

He was about to ask her what in the world she was saying, but before he did he sensed something with murderous intent behind them and pushed her away.

A white blade sprung up from the ground where Fremy had been standing. Adlet turned around and saw Nashetania in the forest.

“Adlet-san, get away from that person!”

Fremy got up and fired her gun without any warning. But another blade sprung up from the ground and deflected the bullet. Then a giant black armored knight came out of the forest and charged at Fremy. Adlet however stood in the knight’s path and deflected the spear with his sword.

“Wait, stop! Don’t attack!” Adlet shouted, but Nashetania and the giant knight weren’t listening.

“I said step aside. Can’t you hear me?”

“What the hell are you doing?” Nashetania shouted as she joined the attack.

Fremy aimed her gun at Nashetania as she dodged another of Nashetania’s blades emerging from the ground. Meanwhile Adlet stopped the knight from trying to attack Fremy from behind.

“What’s so surprising? I did say that if we met we’d kill each other,” Fremy said scornfully.

Adlet had understood that, but he had also thought he’d have more time to talk them down.

“You’re in the way, Adlet.”

The giant knight swung the handle of his spear at Adlet. *Why does he know my name?* Adlet thought, but he didn’t have the time to think about it. He met the knight’s blow with his sword and both of their weapons were knocked backwards from the impact. But, while they were being flung backwards, Adlet threw the sand he was holding into the knight’s eyes.

Whether or not she saw that as an opportunity, at that moment Fremy aimed her gun at the giant knight. But Adlet flung a pebble at her with his sword, hitting her in the neck.

The four of them hectically moved about- Nashetania and the knight aiming for Fremy and Fremy relentlessly counterattacking. All the while Adlet was desperately stopping all of their attacks.

Growing impatient, Nashetania shouted, “Adlet-san, why are you interfering?”

Adlet yelled back even louder, "Everyone stop! She is not the enemy. She is one of the Six Flowers!"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

Fremy and Nashetania stopped. Then the knight shifted his position so that he was in front of Nashetania, as if to protect her. Adlet thrust himself directly in the middle of all three of them.

"Look at her left hand. She is a Hero of the Six Flowers, not an enemy."

Nashetania and the giant knight looked at Fremy, and then gasped when they noticed the crest on her hand. But both didn't make an attempt to lower their weapons.

"Wha...what is this Goldof?" Nashetania asked the giant knight...Goldof.

"I don't understand. I was clearly told that Fremy is indeed the enemy," Goldof responded as he pointed the tip of his spear at Fremy.

"Hey, giant over there. Are you putting ideas in her head? What do you think you're doing?" Adlet asked.

Goldof didn't answer though, he just glared at Adlet.

“...You’re Adlet, the one who had gone off to do something and left the princess behind?”

“And you’re the guy who’s been angry for quite a while. Answer my damn question.”

Adlet and Goldof continued to glare at one another, but soon Nashetania calmed the knight down from behind. And to smoothen the situation, Adlet deliberately spoke slowly and quietly.

“First of all, I’ll ask you Nashetania. Why are you attacking Fremy? She’s our companion.”

“You’re wrong, Adlet-san. Please get away from that girl.”

“Please. Answer my question. I still don’t understand why.”

“...Adlet-san. You might find it hard to believe, but that girl is the criminal Six Flower killer.”

Adlet looked at Fremy’s face. She didn’t flinch; she just stood prepared to use her gun, glaring at Nashetania

“Six Flower killer? What are you talking about?”

"It's credible information that Goldof over there found." Goldof nodded clearly in response to Nashetania's words.

"...Fremy."

Adlet looked at Fremy's face. *It's probably a lie*, he thought. But Fremy answered as if it were extremely obvious.

"They're right."

"...Wha...What are you saying?"

"I told you before. If I told you why the others would kill me then you and I would end up killing one another." The front of Fremy's gun shifted from pointing at Nashetania to Adlet.

"It's a lie, right?"

"It's the truth. I've killed Matola Wichita, Foudelka Holly, Asley Alan, and a number of other warriors who possessed the strength to be chosen as Heroes of the Six Flowers. Even Goldof over there and Nashetania were listed as candidates for elimination. But you weren't under consideration."

Adlet recalled a time he spoke with Nashetania.

“Leura too...did you kill the Saint of the Sun?”

Fremy looked slightly confused.

“The Saint of the Sun? Leura?...I don’t know about that. Though she was a candidate for elimination as well.”

“That’s irrelevant, Mr. Adlet. She’s dangerous. Please come this way,” said Nashetania, but Adlet didn’t look away from Fremy.

“Why? Why would you kill Six Flower candidates?”

“Isn’t there only one answer? In order to revive The Majin. If I kill all the strong warriors then all that would remain to be chosen would be the small fish,” she replied.

Adlet didn’t know how to respond, but then Goldof furiously said, “So then do you understand now? That girl...Fremy is the enemy.”

Nashetania and Goldof split off to the left and right. They were starting to draw near to catch Fremy between them. Adlet however couldn’t move. The criminal Six Flower killer was also one of the Heroes who bore the crest of the Six Flowers. If both were evident facts, he wondered which he should believe.

Then Fremy's words appeared in his head.

"...No!" Adlet shouted, coming to Fremy's defense.

"Adlet-san, why?"

Adlet was indeed worried about where it was good to stop them, but Fremy had said she would not die until she killed The Majin. And he believed those words weren't a lie.

"Listen Nashetania, Goldof. Listen well. The Heroes of the Six Flowers were not chosen just based on our strength. The will to defeat The Majin at all costs is also assessed. It doesn't matter how strong a person is, those who try to be an ally to The Majin cannot be chosen as one of the six."

"But she..."

"Fremy...you're not thinking about resurrecting The Majin, right?"

Fremy nodded.

"And you have some reason that you would want to fight the resurrected Majin."

“...That’s right.”

Adlet looked in Nashetania’s direction and spread his arms out wide.

“Do you understand Nashetania? She is definitely the Six Flower killer. But circumstances have changed.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“I trust her. And I understand this: her desire to kill The Majin is genuine. Even if before she was an enemy, now she is without a doubt an ally.”

“...But...”

“If you want to fight more then I’m taking Fremy’s side.”

Nashetania considered the situation for a moment. As she did, Goldof said, “If I may be so bold to ask, Princess is this Adlet really a reliable character?”

“You’re the guy who was attacking me just a while ago. What’s the big idea?”

“I am here to protect the princess. Anyone who exposes the princess to danger is an enemy.”

"I see. But for now can you ask Nashetania to put away her blades?"

"Adlet, address her as Princess!" Goldof said as he openly expressed his anger.

"How is you two fighting going to help anything? I understand Adlet-san. Since you insist, I guess it can't be helped. Goldof, let's do as Adlet says in this situation," Nashetania commanded then sheathed her sword.

Reluctantly Goldof also lowered his guard. Adlet breathed a sigh of relief.

"But...please be careful," Nashetania continued. "You're very gullible."

"It's alright. I'm the strongest man in the world after all. I won't be fooled."

"I feel very uneasy about this," Nashetania responded.

Adlet looked towards Fremy. "Your concern that you will be killed has disappeared for now, so lower your weapon too."

"Just for now," Fremy said, lowering her weapon and storing it back at her waist.

"Fremy-san. I will tell you this now: though I don't trust you, I do trust Adlet-san."

“You’re a naïve girl to be able to trust a guy like this.”

Though both Nashetania and Fremy had lowered their weapons, the air was still volatile between them. At the same time Goldof stared at Adlet with eyes full of animosity.

The situation made Adlet extremely nervous to the point where he wondered if the Heroes of the Six Flowers would even be able to fight against The Majin.

Part Three

For the time being the four of them decided to head towards where Mora was waiting. And since Fremy had agreed to travel with them, Adlet returned the bags he had taken from her. They were moving along a forest path; Nashetania and Goldof walked close together, Adlet a bit separated from them, and Fremy even further as she'd purposefully placed a large distance between herself and the others. It was like their positions reflected the gaps between the hearts of each other.

“Hey Fremy.”

“What?”

“Since I helped you out back there, don't you think you can say at least some words of gratitude?”

“There's no reason to thank you.”

Adlet shrugged at Fremy's cold words. Then Nashetania lowered her voice so she wouldn't be overheard. “...Adlet-san.”

“What's the matter?” Adlet asked back, but she only replied with a cold stare.

“I'm sorry for leaving you, but it couldn't be helped. I thought it would be bad if Fremy ran away.”

She only stared coldly at him even more. Adlet shrugged again.

“It was just half a day. It seemed like you and I had hit it off quite well.”

“What’s with you talking like that?” Nashetania placed a hand to her mouth. There was a mischievous smile on her face, but what was different about her now as opposed to before were her eyes. They were full of genuine ill will.

“Whatever reason you’re sticking up for her, is it really a situation where you can just say, ‘I see’ and that's that? Well, Fremy-san is certainly very pretty. I’m jealous.”

“...Oy!”

“Right, right I know. Probably all the men in the world love the kind of girl that makes men want to protect them, huh?”

“About that Nashetania...”

“Yeah, yeah. Just go make out somewhere. Hmph.” After those thoroughly sarcastic words she distanced herself from Adlet.

“...Are you really a princess?”

"I'm asked that a lot, but yes I am." Nashetania looked away.

What's with her?

The air floating between them was heavy. Fremy was intentionally ignoring them all completely, and Goldof was glaring at Adlet as if he were unhappy about him talking with Nashetania. So Adlet wondered if this kind of mood would continue all the way until they reached the place where that Mora person was waiting, which only caused him to feel gloomy.

But why exactly is Goldof staring at me? Adlet approached his side and tried to talk with him. "With all the commotion before we didn't even properly introduce ourselves, but I hope from now on we'll work well together. I'm the strongest man in the world, Adlet Maia."

"Ah." Goldof's tone was clearly full of malice.

"The Six Flower Killer, Fremy. You were chasing after her right?"

"That's right."

"I understand you don't feel satisfied with the situation, but put up with it for now. At the very least understand the circumstances we're in."

"What are you saying? I only follow the Princess' commands."

Strange. It didn't seem like he was angry with Fremy. *And if not then why does this guy hate me?*

"Did I do something bad at the tournament? Did I end up hurting your senior?¹ Do you think I should apologize for something?"

"Not really, you don't have to apologize at all."

None of those suggestions seemed to be the reason. *So then what was the cause?* As he pondered the possibilities, Goldof decided to speak to him in a whisper so Nashetania wouldn't hear.

"...Adlet. How did you win over the princess?"

Everything clicked once Adlet heard those words. He then looked back and forth between Nashetania and Goldof to compare their faces.

"Why? Are you worried about me and her becoming friends?"

¹ "Senpai-Kohai" is a concept that is quite common in Japan but has been disappearing in the Western world. It denotes a "Mentor-fledgling" or "senior-junior" relationship that goes far beyond simply issuing and following orders.

“Wo...worry? I’m not...”

“Relax. It’s not what you’re thinking. If you worry about trivial things, she’ll make fun of you.”

“...Uh, what are you saying. Don't be an idiot.”

He was a very simple guy. It seemed like the fact that he and Nashetania were becoming friends was the only thing he wasn’t happy about. Though one couldn’t tell by his appearance, he was still somewhere around 16 years old. Inside his head he was probably still a child.

“Do your best to protect the princess. Along the way she said a lot of things, but it seems like she really relies on you. You’re the only one who can protect her,” Adlet said.

“Naturally, only I can do so.”

Though Adlet had said the words as a flattering compliment, Goldof’s expression seemed to suggest that he wasn’t entirely dissatisfied. He was easy to deal with. And in that sense he was very different from Nashetania and Fremy.

“...But the enemy isn’t coming,” Goldof muttered.

That's absolutely right, Adlet thought.

Things were still way too peaceful. *Why were they still having these nonsense conversations despite being so close to the Wailing Demon territory where the Kyoma lie?* And that fact seemed to make things gradually become more and more ominous.

At that moment, Fremy who had been walking in total silence said, "Curious."

The three of them turned to see Fremy looking up at the sky behind her.

"Flying Kyoma have been circling the sky behind us for some time now."

Adlet took out the telescope from his breast pocket and looked in the direction Fremy indicated. Sure enough there were a number of birdlike creatures circling about.

"There are only a few of them so it's probably nothing to worry about," Nashetania said.

"If I remember correctly, that place over there is..." Adlet gauged the distance between them and the Kyoma by eye and compared it with his mental map of the area. "This is bad. That's where the temple for the Illusion Fog Barrier is located."

Tension rushed over the four of them. Private First Class Rowen had said that once inside the barrier the Kyoma wouldn't be able to get close to the Heroes. Even so, the situation still caused them to be concerned. Adlet looked at Fremy. "Can you shoot them from here?"

"That would be difficult. I'd have to get a bit closer."

"...They dropped something," Goldof muttered.

The Kyoma seemed to be spitting something out of their mouths. And the next instant a thunderous roar accompanied by smoke erupted into the sky.

"Adlet-san. What in the world was that?" Nashetania asked.

"Bombs....The Kyoma are dropping bombs on the temple."

"Bombs? Don't be ridiculous."

Adlet was just as shocked as she was. He'd known there were intelligent Kyoma, but he'd never considered the possibility that one of them had the skill and materials to make explosives.

Nashetania looked at Fremy and asked, "You are the Saint of Gunpowder. Could this be your doing?"

“I know nothing about this.”

“At any rate, let’s go!”

The four dashed back onto the road they came. The temple was about fifteen minutes away if they ran at full speed. But after running for about five minutes they saw a line of Kyoma blocking their way. They hadn’t seen any Kyoma before when they’d passed through this area, so obviously the Kyoma planned to keep them in the forest.

“Let's break through just like this! Goldof!”

In response to her voice, Goldof crouched, making his body as small as possible. Then like a giant bullet he charged towards one of the Kyoma. Adding a twisting motion to his spear, he put his entire weight into his weapon and thrust it into the head of a Kyoma that resembled a bear but had the head of an insect. The Kyoma probably weighed ten times more than Goldof, yet it was still flung ten meters back by the blow.

Goldof tried to dash into the opening he’d created in the line, but a tiger-shaped Kyoma to the side shouted, “Arr-rived. Ge...get them!” Though the words were difficult to make out, they were definitely human speech.

The lined up Kyoma swooped down simultaneously on Goldof, who was leading the attack.

You're too impatient. Adlet thought as the tiger Kyoma motioned to the others to surround them from all sides. These Kyoma were completely different from those that could simply be confronted head on. If they understood human speech then they would have the intelligence to set up a flanking tactic. They must have lived for a considerably long time.

Goldof bashed his way through the Kyoma that were attacking them for all sides and Nashetania, while protecting his back, delivered the finishing blows to the Kyoma he'd knocked down. Adlet and Fremy were also being attacked from all sides, causing Adlet to throw down the iron box on his back and fight back.

The battle became a hectic brawl, preventing any of the heroes from getting out of the circle of Kyoma and making their way to the temple.

"Adlet-san. Please head to the temple. We'll handle this," Nashetania said as she blocked an attack from a wolf-shaped Kyoma.

"Ah, right. I guess getting us out of a tough situation is my role after all. Hey Fremy, Goldof, look closely. I am the strongest man in the world."

"Enough of that already. Just hurry!"

He wasn't really screwing around, in fact he was actually thinking of a way out of their predicament as he spoke.

“Nashetania, Goldof, Fremy! Attack in the direction of the temple with everything you’ve got.”

Nashetania and Goldof nodded. And though Fremy didn’t show any change in her expression, it seemed like she’d at least acknowledged his command.

Goldof thrust his spear and knocked back a Kyoma. Then Nashetania summoned a sword to impale the Kyoma behind it. And Fremy shot down another Kyoma that was in front of Adlet.

“Perfect.”

Adlet ran over one of the blades Nashetania summoned and blew a poison dart at the last Kyoma coming to attack him. As the dart disabled the Kyoma, Adlet escaped the circle and pushed on towards the temple.

“We’re counting on you.”

“Leave it to me!”

Since Nashetania and the others were holding his pursuers at bay, Adlet didn’t need to issue any further orders. Not only were there no Kyoma chasing after him, but it didn’t seem like they were planning an ambush either.

After running at full strength for about ten minutes the sound of the battle died down. And before long the forest opened up and revealed a temple.

“There.”

Adlet halted and examined the temple. It seemed like the Kyoma that had bombed the temple already left. However, the stench of gunpowder still remained strong.

The temple was unexpectedly small, about the size of a common home. But the stone wall around it was startlingly well built.

The entire building was surrounded by about 20 white pillars. They were probably the defense the Saint of Salt built to drive away the Kyoma. Outside the perimeter were a multitude of footprints from various types of Kyoma, but inside the area demarcated by the pillars there wasn't even one. It didn't seem like the Kyoma could go past those salt pillars.

Parts of the pillars were chipped off from the bombings and there were scorch marks on the temple, but it didn't seem like any of the bombs had been a critical strike.

There were probably no victims, he thought when he found a woman fallen beside one of the salt pillars.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

Adlet rushed over. The woman was wearing a Shinto priest outfit (1) and her back was terribly burned.

“Hang in there, I’ll help you.” Adlet said, sitting her up in his arms. “Don’t worry! Your wounds aren’t deep!” He said as he searched one of his pouches for medicine.

“Qui-ckly,” the woman said, pointing to the temple.

“It's alright now! Don’t move.”

“Quickly... hurry, you won’t make it.... please all...”

Adlet ground his teeth. Without medicine there was little he could do for her. / *wish I’d brought the iron box.* It contained bandages and gauze for burns.

“I'm alright...even though things look bad...I’m a Saint.”

“Don't die.”

Adlet gently lowered her head to the ground, then went past the salt pillars and stood in front of the temple.

The temple door was closed with a strong lock. Adlet inserted his sword into the keyhole and tried to forcibly wrench it open, but the lock didn't budge.

"Shit, no one said it was locked. You there," Adlet shouted to the woman. "The key!"

The woman shook her head. Adlet then took out an adhesive explosive from one of his pouches, mounted it to the lock and lit it.

With an explosion the lock blew open. And right after, two soldiers appeared from the inside. Clad from head to toe in body armor with swords sticking out from all over their bodies, the two charged at Adlet.

"What is this?"

The soldiers came at him in a straight line, but they weren't moving very quickly. He didn't need to go so far as to use one of his secret weapons; he just hit their heads with the hilt of his sword. But as their helmets fell off, Adlet saw that they didn't have heads.

"What the hell?"

He tried to ask the Shinto Priest garbed woman what was going on, but at that moment a shrill laugh filled the air.

“Akyakyakyakya,” The fallen woman cackled as her body contorted and effortlessly bent towards him. A horn sprouted out from her forehead and her face changed into that of a hideous monkey.

Adlet knew what she was. She was a shape-shifting Kyoma. His master had told him that while there were only a few Kyoma that could transform into humans or animals, they did indeed exist.

“You!”

The shape-shifting Kyoma immediately ran away. He started to chase after her but soon stopped himself. Investigating the state of the temple was his top priority. But when he again headed towards the temple, a sense of dread suddenly rushed over him.

“What the...?”

As if his entire body had been dropped in icy water, the air all at once grew colder.

Then slowly a mist rose up from the ground. First it rose from his feet to his chest, then it went up to his head and in the blink of an eye it had completely covered everything.

Adlet recalled Private First Class Rowen's words: *After the barrier is activated the entire forest will be shrouded in mist.*

Adlet's entire body started to tremble. It wasn't so much that his mind had sensed danger, as it was that his body felt it.

After the barrier is activated no one will be able to enter inside any more.

Adlet entered the tiny temple and looked at the altar mounted in the center of the structure.

And those inside won't be able to leave. It would have the same effect on both humans and Kyoma.

Rowen had said that if someone placed their hand on the stone slab containing the god's power and stood the treasured sword on the pedestal then the barrier would activate.

And Adlet was looking directly at the sword placed in that pedestal.

“...I didn’t move it,” Adlet muttered. “Who was it? Who activated the barrier?”

Adlet rushed out of the temple and ran around the area shouting. He then blew the flute that attracted the Kyoma and then looked over the area with his telescope.

“Adlet-san!”

After a while Nashetania appeared, her face turning red and her expression hardening as she ran towards Adlet. Goldof and Fremy came soon after.

“What happened? Why did you activate the barrier!?” She shouted. It was the first time he’d heard her angry.

Dumbfounded, Adlet responded, “...No, it wasn’t me. Someone activated the barrier then vanished in an instant.”

“That’s a lie.”

“I’m not lying. In an instant, they really disappeared in an instant.”

Nashetania’s lips were trembling and Goldof looked at him with a wide-eyed stare. Even Fremy was at a loss for words.

This can't be happening. Were they trapped?

“In any case, everyone inside.” Adlet said and the four of them rushed into the temple.

Part Four

Nashetania stared completely bewildered at the sword in the pedestal. She then tried placing her hand on the sword, and after that rechecked the blade and the pedestal.

"The barrier's been activated. I can't believe it. Who did this?" said Nashetania, forcing the words out of her lips.

"Sorry, but I have no idea what happened," Adlet said, shaking his head.

"At any rate we have to lower the barrier," Goldof said. "Excuse me." He then approached the altar and removed the sword. However, they couldn't see any change to the mist shrouding their surroundings.

"Was it no use? Princess, do you know of a method to lower the barrier?"

"I don't know either. But there has to-"

"Give that to me for a second," Adlet interrupted.

"Do you know something?"

“The previous Six Flowers had created a similar barrier. They must have called off the barrier like this.”

Adlet ran the blade over his hand, cutting the skin, and dripped his blood off the sword and onto the pedestal.

“Barrier dissolve,” Adlet announced, but nothing happened.

Next Nashetania grabbed the sword. “Barrier dissolve! Barrier dispel! Stop! Stop the fog! I am the owner of the barrier.”

One after another she tried saying potential suitable phrases, but in the end the barrier did not fade. Then finally, as if she were tired of waiting, she started to hit the pedestal and the slab with the hilt of her rapier, cracking the treasured sword and breaking the slab.

“Calm down Nashetania. There’s no point in being reckless,” Fremy said from behind in a cold-hearted voice. “Rowen from the fortress should be near. He should be moving due to the explosions.”

“...That’s right. I’m sorry.” Nashetania looked ashamed, but then she commanded, “Goldof, you defend the temple. You too Fremy.”

And then she and Adlet left the temple and began to search for Rowen.

#

They searched for about 30 minutes, but their search yielded no results. So they headed back to the temple. Either Rowen and his soldiers had never come to the area, or they had already been killed.

“What should we do? With things going on like this, the Saint Mora that we’d talked about will be isolated.”

“More importantly, we can’t leave this place.”

The four then faced one another and discussed ways to get out of their predicament, but no good ideas came up.

“What’s all this noise?” Someone said from front of the temple.

The group looked over to see a girl was standing in front of the temple's broken door. She had a strange appearance. She looked 13 or 14 years old, was wearing a frilly checkered dress, and had a clownish hat. In addition, she was holding a piece of green foxtail grass¹ and had a bag and water canteen hanging diagonally from her shoulder across her body. It was like she had lost her way in the middle of having a picnic.

“Um, giant over there,” the girl said as she looked at Goldof.

¹ A type of grass, you can see a good image of it in the character introduction image for Chamo

“You found the Six Flower killer, huh? And over there is definitely Piena’s Princess-sama.” This time she looked to Nashetania. She was speaking without any anxiety, as if she had completely no idea what kind of situation she'd walked into. “You two were chosen as one of the Six Flowers?”

“Who are you?” Adlet asked.

The girl smiled and said, “Nice to meet you, person with the funny belts. It is the Saint of Swamps, Chamo Rosso. And Chamo has been chosen as one of the Six Flowers.” She then lifted up the hem of her skirt, showing them the crest of the Six Flowers on her thigh.

“A child like this?” Adlet murmured.

Chamo Rosso, the Saint of Swamps. There wasn’t a person who made a living off of battle that didn’t know her name. He’d even heard her power far exceeded Nashetania’s. And not only was she the strongest warrior of the current age, but excluding the Saint of the Single Flower, she was also famed as the most powerful warrior in all of history. However, though Adlet didn’t really know what kind of power she used, he’d never thought she would possibly be a child.

“Who are you?” Chamo asked him.

“Me? I’m Adlet Maia, the strongest man in the world. Like you I was also chosen as one of the Six Flowers.”

"Strongest in the world? Isn't that Chamo?" the girl responded.

"It seems like it's popular to say that, but in reality you're not. The strongest person in the world is actually me."

"I don't understand what you're saying." Chamo craned her neck to the side.

Jokingly, Adlet said, "I have to apologize. I ended up taking the title of the world's strongest away from you. Well...being second in the world is incredible enough, so you should be content."

"Hoey," Chamo made a strange sound and crossed her arms to think. Then after a moment, she clapped her hands and said, "Ah, I got it. This person is an idiot."

"He's a bit strange, but he's reliable. Rest assured," Nashetania said, cutting into their conversation as she stood to the side.

That was when Adlet noticed Fremy behind him. Up until then her face had been blank, but now she was growing pale and her lips were trembling slightly.

Chamo looked to her and said, "Long time no see, Fremy. Why are you here?"

Adlet was about to ask if they knew one another, but Fremy simply shrank in fear.

“Well Fremy, we’ll talk about you later. Now, what in the world happened here?”

As Chamo twirled the foxtail in her hands, an eerie smile appeared on her face.

#

Nashetania and Adlet took turns telling Chamo the sequence of events that led them to the temple. Chamo hadn’t stopped by the fortress where Private First class Rowen was, but she did seem to know a little about the Illusion Fog Barrier. However, she also said that she didn’t know enough where she could think of a method that could lift the barrier.

While they talked sometimes Adlet would look over to Fremy. She was quiet and standing still by the edge of the temple. He didn’t even try and touch on the subject of Chamo and her connection.

“Hmm. I understand. We’re in a little trouble.”

What’s little? Adlet thought.

“Well that’s okay. But, for the time being, shall we kill Fremy?” Chamo said it as if it were the most natural thing in the world. And on reflex Fremy took out her gun.

“Wait!” Adlet promptly threw himself between the two of them.

Chamo looked at him with a bewildered gaze. "Why are you interfering?"

"I should be asking you what you're thinking. We just explained that Fremy is our companion."

"You say strange things. She is the Six Flower Killer. She also activated the barrier."

Chamo touched the foxtail grass to her mouth, but then Nashetania grabbed Chamo's wrist.

"Please wait Chamo-san. When the barrier was activated Fremy was with us. She couldn't have activated it."

"Ah, right. But this isn't related to that, so let go."

"No."

Chamo glared at Nashetania with eyes full of silent anger. "Why are you giving commands to Chamo? Are you some great person? Some place's princess or something?"

"Yes, that's right."

“...Come to think of it, that is right. So, what should we do about this?” With a bitter smile, Chamo shrugged.

“Chamo, did something happen with you and Fremy?” Adlet asked, but the one who answered wasn’t Chamo, but Goldof who had been silently watching.

“Chamo fought with Fremy before.”

“What do you mean?”

Taking over from where Goldof left off, Chamo began to speak. “It was about half a year ago. Fremy had been aiming her gun at Chamo. Chamo's pet had immediately protected Chamo, but it was a close call. Then Chamo and Fremy fought, but Fremy ended up fleeing. It was the first time Chamo didn’t finish off someone she wanted to kill. So Chamo was extremely angry.” Murderous intent seemed to be emanating from her body.

“All this time Chamo’s been thinking that Chamo has to kill Fremy. So it’s okay to kill her.”

Adlet shook his head and Nashetania didn’t release Chamo’s wrist. A turbulent atmosphere hung within the temple.

“Chamo-san. Please wait a moment. First we should deal with dissolving the barrier,” Nashetania said.

“You princess and the giant will have to somehow handle the barrier. Meanwhile, Chamo will be doing away with Fremy.”

“Nashetania is right, Chamo. With the five of us here that means Mora who went before us is all alone. For her sake, lowering the barrier takes precedence.”

Adlet and Nashetania continued to try and persuade Chamo into restraining herself, but then another voice came from the entrance of the temple. “There’s no need to worry about me.”

Everyone looked in the direction of the voice to see a tall woman standing at the entrance. She looked like she was probably in her mid-twenties. Her eyes were vibrant and her demeanor appeared serious. Black hair flowed down to her back and she was wearing a blue Shinto priest outfit. Plus her arms were in two pieces of iron armor which looked like they served as both weapons and shields.

Just by standing there Adlet knew that she was an exceptional warrior.

“It’s been a long time, Princess Nashetania, Chamo. And I suppose the man over there is Goldof-dono. How are you?” The woman walked to the center of the temple. “I’m the Saint of Mountains, Mora Chester. I serve as the head of all the world’s temples. I’ll be counting on you all.”

Even after Mora appeared, Nashetania didn’t release Chamo’s wrist. However, Mora then approached, stepped in between them, and forced them apart.

“It seems like there is some kind of dispute. Chamo this is not the time to be self-centered.”

“...Mora-obachan, Chamo didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Is that right? I’ll listen to your excuse later. For now be quiet.”

Due to Mora’s intervention Chamo reluctantly backed down. It made Adlet feel relieved that a seemingly reliable person had appeared. And now with her arrival all Six Heroes of the Six Flowers were assembled.

“Now shall we move to the real issue at hand? Why has the barrier been activated?”

“I fear we fell into the enemy’s trap,” Nashetania replied.

“Probably so. The Kyoma wonderfully turned our own weapons against us.”

“Huh? It’s not a big deal. If we know how to lower the barrier then there won’t be a problem,” Adlet said.

“Yeah, that’s right...young man?” Then as if she’d noticed something, she looked around at each of the faces one by one. “Incidentally it would seem that an intruder has slipped into our ranks. Who is it?”

Everyone except Mora looked confused.

“Wait a second. What do you mean?”

“I don’t mean anything, don’t we have one person too many?”

What is she saying? Adlet thought when yet another voice came from the temple entrance.

“Meow? ² It seems like a crowd. By any chance have all the members assembled?”

A strange man entered the temple. He had disheveled hair that covered his eyes and a sloppy appearance, making it difficult for Adlet to discern his age. He was wearing a crude hempen shirt, pants and soft leather shoes. If someone took away the nata³ hanging at his waist, he would look like an extremely ordinary person. And as if he’d intended it as a joke, a cat’s tail was attached to the back of his pants.

The man looked around the inside of the temple with a playful smile.

“Meowy, there are a lot of beautiful women in this group of Six Flowers. I suddenly feel very motivated.”

² In Japanese it is a common trope for characters in anime or manga to mimic cat noises as they talk.

³ A type of curved blade

“...Who are you?” Nashetania asked.

But instead of the man answering, Mora said, “I shall introduce him. I only met him yesterday. This is Hans Humpty. He’s one of the Six Flowers.”

What is she talking about? Weren’t all the Heroes already here?

“It seems like someone brought a person who wasn’t chosen as one of the six. Which one of you is not one of the Six Flowers?”

Adlet couldn’t think. All he knew was that they were in a strange and absurd situation. Both Nashetania and Goldof stood still, completely dumbfounded. The expressionless Fremy and even the seemingly composed Chamo was flustered, unable to process the current situation.

“...Everyone show your crests,” Adlet said and stuck out the crest on his right hand.

Then Fremy showed her crest on the back of her right hand to everyone. Next Nashetania lowered the armor on her chest and exposed the crest near her collar. And following her, Chamo lifted her skirt and stuck out her thigh with the crest on it.

“Wha...what are you doing?” Mora was bewildered.

“Goldof, what about you? I haven’t seen your crest,” Adlet said. In response, Goldof removed the armor from his right shoulder and turned his arm upwards. The crest of the Six Flowers was unmistakably on his shoulder.

Looking at the five’s exposed crests, Mora and Hans’ expressions froze as they suddenly realized what exactly they were seeing.

“Mora-san, Hans-san, please show us your crests as well.”

“Meow, meow, what is this?” Hans took off his shirt and with his upper body bare, he showed them the crest on his right breast, around where his heart was.

“...Mora-san, your crest.”

“Impossible. What is this? What in the world is happening?”

Everyone’s gaze went to Mora. She undid the buttons on her Shinto garb, turned around and lowered the back of her clothes. At the center of her back, between her shoulder blades was clearly the crest of the Six Flowers.

“There are seven?” an astounded Nashetania murmured.

Flustered, Mora shouted, “Check well. It is impossible for there to be seven Heroes of the Six Flowers.”

The seven then checked each other's crests. Again and again they checked for differences in size and differences in the faint light crimson glow. But all of their crests were the same without even a tiny difference.

All seven of them were at a loss for words, completely clueless as to what was going on.

"...Isn't it impossible for seven people to be chosen as the Heroes?" Adlet muttered.

"...Young man. In the past, the Saint of the Single Flower split her power into six parts and left it for the future generations," Mora answered. "Each warrior inherits one of those pieces which is why there are only Six Heroes."

"So in other words, what the hell is happening?"

"There are only Six Heroes. Any more or any fewer is impossible."

"But there are seven people here now," Fremy said.

"Right, there are seven people. But what does it mean?" No one answered Mora's question.

“Meoahahaha,” After a while, laughter suddenly resounded through the temple. The one laughing was the strange man, Hans, who had been the last to enter the temple.

“What’s so funny?”

“Meow. It’s not something you have to think so hard about. Basically someone here is an imposter,” Hans said quickly.

“So, the topic then is why an imposter is here,” Mora said.

“One of us is an enemy, meow?”

Adlet was silent. That wasn’t necessarily the case.

“Maybe the goddess of fate didn’t think six would be enough so she added another. Is that impossible?” Nashetania said, though her voice lacked any confidence.

“But if that’s the case, wouldn’t that have been told to us? Yet even if it had, we wouldn’t know whether or not the goddess of fate spoke or not, meow.”

Adlet realized what Hans was saying was the most logical explanation.

“One of us is an imposter. And they’re not trying to come forward. So if they’re not an enemy then what the hell are they? If there is another reason, I want someone to tell me, meow.”

As Hans spoke he looked over at each of the other’s faces. Cold sweat was even forming on his own head. Adlet and the others all came together and looked at each other. But just like Adlet and Hans, all of their faces seemed to show confusion and fear.

One of them was an enemy, yet from their expressions no one had any clue who it was.

#

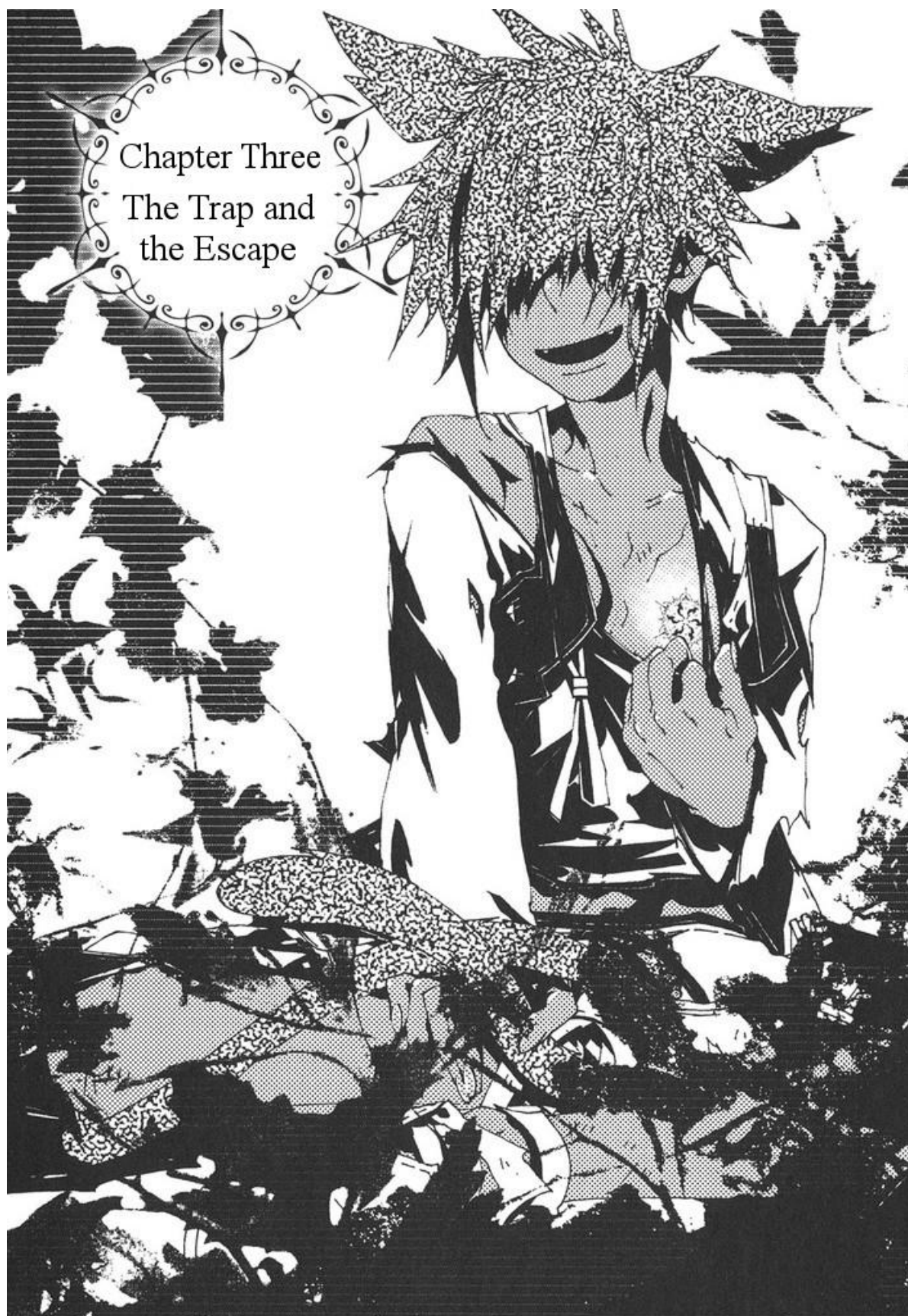
I feel like I’ll burst out in laughter, the one lurking among the seven secretly thought. [They]⁴ were trying with all [their] might to act flustered as [they] stared directly at the Heroes of the Six Flowers.

It had all been [their] plan and everything had perfectly unfolded just as [they’d] predicted. With [their] fake crest [they’d] slipped in among the Six Flowers. Then [they] lured the six to the barrier and sealed them within the forest. As if exactly following their hypothetical scenario, [their] entire plan had been a success.

⁴ “They/their” refers to the impostor in the group. In the Japanese the character’s gender is not revealed through the narration, so I used “they” to maintain that effect. I also added brackets to show the reader that this “they” is a stand-in for a specific person.

Things had progressed far too simply and as for the Six, fear was now spreading through them.

So from here on out, the imposter planned to continue to conceal [their] true identity and proceed to take out the Six Flowers one by one. It would probably be an extremely easy task. And [their] first objective was Adlet Maia. He was the first person [they] would kill.



Chapter 3: Part One

It had been an hour since the seven heroes had gathered at the temple. For a lot of that time Adlet had been running through the forest, and if his mental map were correct then the area around him at the moment was the edge of the Illusion Fog Barrier.

"What is this Illusion Fog Barrier? All I know is that I'll have a big smile if we can quickly get out of it, meow."

Hans, who Adlet had just met a little while ago, was running beside him. Though he wasn't in a position to be critical of others, Adlet thought Hans was very suspicious and so he watched him with a distrustful gaze.

As he ran, Adlet left marks on the trees around them. But after advancing for a while the trees he'd marked before now stood in their path. Eventually they found that their entire direction of motion had been reversed.

"So the barrier has been activated after all."

"Just as we thought," Hans said.

The two of them once again tried to exit the barrier but the result was the same. They tried walking in a straight line, and they even tried throwing a string and following that as they advanced, but they couldn't get out of the barrier.

However, the one thing they did realize was that their sense of direction only got mixed up when they tried to exit the barrier. As long as they were inside, they weren't lost.

"It looks like deactivating the barrier is our only option after all." Adlet sighed.

For the time being the seven had decided to focus on removing the barrier. That was a far more urgent problem than searching for the impostor among them. So while Adlet and Hans confirmed the state of the barrier's boundaries, the remaining five stayed at the temple and searched for a way to lift the barrier.

"Let's return to the temple," Hans suggested. Adlet nodded and they started to run. "Meow, by the way, by any chance are you the guy who barged his way into Piena's tournament before the goddess?"

"That's right, have you heard of it?"

"There's a rumor that you, the cowardly warrior, took Batwal's granddaughter hostage. Is that true?"

"It's just some kind of rumor." Adlet hadn't taken anyone hostage. And Hans had no right to call him a cowardly warrior in the first place.

"By the way Hans, I've never heard your name before. Where have you been and what have you been doing?"

Other than Hans, all the others that had gathered were famous people. Of course Nashetania was, but Mora, Chamo, and Goldof were also well-known names. Even Fremy as the Six Flower Killer was infamous. Only Hans was completely unknown.

"Well if you knew that would be a problem."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Without answering, Hans simply flashed him a giant grin.

When they returned to the temple they found that the other five had been waiting for them to return. Nashetania, Mora, and Chamo were gathered around the altar, and standing slightly apart from them were Fremy and Goldof.

Both of Fremy's wrists were wrapped in chains which Goldof was holding. He was also watching her closely, not even overlooking the slightest movement. Plus her bags and gun were in Mora's possession, which all basically meant that it was impossible for Fremy to resist.

Naturally Fremy was also the first to be placed under suspicion. Chamo insisted on killing her soon, but after the six of them had discussed it they reached the conclusion that they would restrain her for the time being. So the bound Fremy stared emotionless at the altar. It was an expression of someone who had given up on something.

"So, what's the deal Mora?" Hans asked. Mora seemed to be the most knowledgeable about both the holy writings that used the power of the Saints and the barrier that amplified the Saints' powers.

"Yes, I know to some extent, but before I talk can you tell me a bit about yourself? I still haven't connected your face to your name."

"Meomeow, your memory is awful." Hans laughed.

"Along with the introduction, tell me briefly about your background and what you have been doing up till when we all gathered."

"Why?"

"I may need to reference it later to determine who the impostor...the seventh person is."

Adlet and the others gathered around the altar and Goldof pushed Fremy over, forcing her to join the circle.

"Well then, who will start?" Mora asked.

Before anyone knew it she had assumed the role of leader and everyone had naturally accepted that. She was composed and dignified.

"I'll start. I'm Adlet Maia, the strongest man in the world."

Adlet was the first to get the ball rolling. He touched upon his history, his encounters with Nashetania and Fremy, and what happened when he finally reached the temple. Of course he repeated the fact that he was the world's strongest man over and over again.

"...Um, Adlet huh? Clearly a strange man has been chosen." Mora said with a shrug after Adlet had finished his explanation.

"The world's strongest? Meohaha, you're an idiot. This guy's a serious idiot." Hans did nothing but laugh.

Adlet however ignored him. "When the barrier was activated, I was the closest person. Should I talk about what happened then too?"

"No, I'll specifically ask you about that later. Who's next?"

Nashetania, who was standing beside Adlet, raised her hand.

"I especially want to hear the rabbit girl's story. If possible, I want to hear it alone, with just the two of us."

"Hans or whoever you are, it might be a bit better to know your place. This is the crown princess of the Kingdom of Piena. She is essentially not someone who listens to someone like you," Goldof interjected.

"Meow? She's a princess, even though she's a bunny girl?! Now my interest is swelling even more."

"Is it alright if I talk?" Nashetania asked, looking fed up.

Her story up until when she came to the temple **wasn't** that different from Adlet's. The only things he heard for the first time were how she'd met up with Goldof soon after he'd strayed away, and how the two of them had talked about the Illusion Fog Barrier at the fortress after Adlet and Fremy had left.

Goldof then continued from there. He talked about how he'd been pursuing the Six Flower killer and how he'd been alone in the Nation of the Sacred River when he'd received the crest of the Six Flowers. He also talked about his reunion with Nashetania. Of course, Adlet already knew about everything he'd said.

The next to speak was Mora. "My name is Mora Chester. I am the Saint of Mountains and the current head of all the temples in the world."

"All the temples in the world?" Adlet interrupted. He'd heard her name before, but he didn't know very much about her.

Beside him, Nashetania added a complimentary explanation. "She is in charge of the organization that supervises all the Saints."

"Well, it's not like I'm doing a very important job. I just keep track of the Saints so that they are not abusing their powers. In any case, I have to memorize all 78 of the Saints' names, faces, and their powers."

"Those like Chamo when they acquire the power of a Saint must go to Mora's place and introduce themselves," said Chamo.

"But I didn't know the one over there by the name of Fremy. The Saint of Gunpowder, huh? I've never heard of that person. She's probably a newly created Saint."

"Isn't it impossible for a new saint to be born?" Adlet asked.

"It's not unheard of, though it hasn't happened in the past 100 years or so. Now back to my story," Mora continued. "About ten years ago I assumed the role of the head of all the world's temples, replacing the previous leader Leura-sama, the Saint of the Sun."

Leura. Adlet had heard that name over and over again during his journey. The Saint who could wield the light and heat of the sun and had the power to incinerate castles.

Even though she'd gotten older, he didn't know if her ability to wield the sun had weakened, but he'd heard that her body had deteriorated to the point where she could no longer move out from her easy chair¹. And on top of that, about one month ago her whereabouts had become unknown.

"For ten years I think I have fulfilled by duties without any grave errors. Keeping Chamo from acting violently was my only hardship."

"I think Mora-san has done splendid work. Even my father has said that as long as Mora-san exists the Saints would probably not commit any evil acts."

"The King of Piena said that? I'm honored." Mora nodded with satisfaction in response to Nashetania's words.

"I was doing my job in the country of the red peaks when The Majin awoke. I soon departed for the Wailing Demon territory and arrived at the rendezvous point two days later. I heard from Private First Class Rowen at the fortress about the Illusion Fog Barrier and that was the same day we decided our plan. I had been hiding in wait alone, but yesterday Hans came wandering my way. He'd already seen the explosions that occurred in the direction of the temple and so had been heading in that direction."

"You didn't know about the Illusion Fog Barrier until two days ago? Isn't your job to manage the Saints?" Adlet asked.

¹ Could be a rocking chair, could be a reclining chair, or a very comfortable chair. But in all cases, it is a furnishing that allows the user to relax in comfort

"I knew of its existence, but I hadn't heard about it in detail. I heard about how to activate the barrier, and the location of the temple two days ago from Rowen. So, I imagine he spoke a lot with Uspa the Saint of Mist or Adorea the Saint of Illusions beforehand."

The names she'd just given were probably the Saints that made the barrier. She was probably acquaintanced with them. *I should remember that for later.*

"Well then, next is Chamo," Mora said and Chamo nodded.

"Umm, well Chamo is Chamo, the 14 year old Saint of Swamps. Chamo became a saint maybe around seven years old. Chamo is a bit too strong, so when Chamo uses their power Mora-obachan² always gets angry.

"Quite a while back Chamo entered the tournament in the Nation of the Yellow Fruits. In the first round Chamo killed their opponent by mistake. After that all the people who should have come out abstained from participating."

Even Adlet knew that story. Stories depicting her strength were well known.

"Until Chamo arrived here nothing in particular happened in their life...When The Majin awoke Chamo was at their house. Chamo's mother and father prepared them for the journey and after receiving a map Chamo headed towards The

² The honorific "obasan" is used to show politeness to older women. The "chan" diminutive making the phrase "obachan" denotes familiarity and/or closeness.

Wailing Demon territory. Really, Chamo should have been the first to arrive, but along the way Chamo got lost and was delayed.

"So when Chamo was randomly walking and killing Kyoma they heard some kind of commotion and went in that direction. When they did, a fog suddenly started to appear and when they went to the temple Fremy was there, both facts which surprised Chamo. That's all of Chamo's story."

After Chamo had finished her explanation, Goldof offered supplementary explanation to Mora and Hans detailing how before Chamo had fought with Fremy and also how Fremy was the criminal Six Flower killer.

"Meow, she's the Six Flower killer? I don't believe it."

"She herself confessed to being the killer. I don't think it's a mistake," Goldof replied. And though it looked like he were thinking about something, Hans didn't say anything.

"We shall hear Fremy's story last. Next is Hans," Mora said.

"Yes."

As Mora suggested, Hans began to talk. *I should pay close attention as I listen*, Adlet thought.

Though it wasn't good to just fixate on his appearance, manner of speaking and his composed attitude, the guy was still the most suspicious.

"Meow, I'm Hans Humpty. I was born in....well, that's inconsequential. As for my work, I'm an assassin."

"Assassin?" Nashetania craned her neck to the side.

"Princess, assassins are people who are contracted to murder for money. They are people whose trade is killing people." Nashetania seemed shocked by Goldof's explanation. It was as if she hadn't known that kind of profession existed.

"....Someone like that is one of the Six Flowers?"

"Meow? Is it bad for an assassin to be a hero?" Hans said as if ridiculing Nashetania for being ignorant of the ways of the world. "The histories of the Six Flowers are irrelevant. The guys who can defeat the Majin, whether they are assassins or not, are the ones chosen to be one of the Heroes. Am I wrong?"

"Bu...but..."

"Princess-san, the more you think about it, the more you'll realize that you can't correct the world. In fact a lot of the people who have requested my services have been important people from your country."

"That can't be true!"

"Well, assassins and so on are not worth worrying about. Can I continue my story, meow?"

Adlet nodded. Though it may have been bad for Nashetania, the details of the work of an assassin were a story for another day.

"When I was chosen as one of the Six Flowers I was relatively close to the Wailing Demon territory. First, I met with the king of this country and negotiated how much I would receive for defeating The Majin. The king was very generous and I received a large amount of payment in advance. So after that I hid that money and came to the Wailing Demon territory where I met Mora."

"Money negotiations? Before fighting?"

"Meow? As a rule I do not kill if there's no money involved. Don't tell me you all are just working too?"

Adlet had never considered making money or something like that off defeating The Majin.

"You didn't know about the barrier?" Goldof asked.

"Meow? I guess the king had insisted I go to the fortress, or something like that meow. But I thought it had nothing to do with me, so I ignored it. I heard about the barrier from Mora."

Something about that wasn't right, Adlet thought. Shouldn't the Illusion Fog Barrier be an important information? Adlet couldn't understand his reason for meeting up with Mora without hearing that information, but for the time being he didn't say anything and decided to just listen to his story.

"After that there's nothing to tell. I saw the explosions happening and came to the temple, meow."

That was when Chamo asked the question she had been thinking about throughout his entire story. "Hey why do you talk like that?"

After she asked, Hans stroked his face with his hand like a cat did with its paws. Then he did a back somersault in the air. When he landed he replied, "My fighting style is called Cat's Blade. It's a sword style I worked out by imitating the movement of cats. Cats are somewhat like my masters, meow. And so to express my respect for them I even talk like them."

"The Six Flowers this time are all a bunch of strange people," Mora grumbled.

"Absolutely." Adlet nodded in agreement.

"You shouldn't speak. You're the world's strongest fool," Hans said with a laugh.

After Han's story was over, everyone's gaze fell on the last person. Restrained by Goldof, Fremy had listened to her other companions without uttering a single word.

"...And now the so-called Fremy," Mora said.

"If you don't want to talk that's too bad. You should consider the fact that hesitating will only worsen your position."

"What can be worse than this?" Fremy spat, then fell silent again. But after a brief silence, slowly she started to speak.

"I am a child born between Kyoma and Humans."

Everyone gasped except Chamo and Goldof.

"Goldof. Remove the cloth around her head and her eye patch."

Complying with the command, Goldof exposed her head. Her right eye was pink and there was a trace of a horn at the center of her forehead; the proof of a Kyoma's identity. It had been broken off from the base, only leaving a scar.

Part Two

"Come to think of it, you no longer have a horn. Did you break it off yourself?" Chamo asked.

Instead of answering, however, Fremy proceeded to tell her story.

"About twenty years ago a single Kyoma left the Wailing Demon territory and hid in the world of humans. They were preparing for The Majin's revival, and the soldier they created to oppose the Heroes of the Six Flowers was me.

"My father was human. I don't know his face though because my mother killed him as soon as I was conceived. I was born from a Kyoma mother and raised by Kyoma. My mother and her fellow Kyoma abducted many humans and made them create a new sacred site worshiping the God of gunpowder. Then I received the power of the Saint of Gunpowder."

"And then..."

"Living up to my mother's expectations, I became strong. I followed my mother's commands and went around killing strong humans, all to make it so The Majin was revived perfectly. I had no doubts. Though I was half human I thought I was a legitimate Kyoma. We would protect The Majin and it would lead us into what I believed to be a brilliant direction."

"So why are you here? Why did you decide to fight The Majin?" Mora asked. And that was exactly the core of her story.

"....Even if I told you, it doesn't seem like you'll believe me."

"However, if you don't speak we won't know whether to believe you or not."

Mora and Fremy both stared at one another. Then Chamo interjected, "It's alright if you don't really talk, since we plan on killing you nonetheless. Isn't that right? We've decided that the impostor is Fremy, right?"

"Quit it Chamo, nothing has been decided yet."

Chamo looked at Adlet with an innocent expression on her face. But in the center of her eyes still dwelt a faint anger.

"What's your name again? You're a pain. Chamo's mother didn't tell you to order Chamo around, right?"

"Hell if I know."

"Well now you know this. Don't talk back to Chamo."

"Chamo! Now is the time to hear Fremy's story," Mora scolded and Chamo grew quiet. Adlet was grateful Mora was there. If she weren't he had no idea what would have happened.

"Fremy-san, please talk. Why is it that you're fighting The Majin?" Nashetania asked, but Fremy only looked at everyone with a cold stare.

"...Chamo said it's alright if I don't talk. So I agree. I too don't want to talk." After she said that, Fremy completely stopped talking. And even when Adlet asked her to speak, she wouldn't even meet his gaze.

Before long, Mora changed the topic, as if she were growing impatient.

"Self introductions eating up time can't be helped. But more importantly, how can we get out of here?"

Adlet was about to resist saying they weren't done talking, but he stopped himself. Mora's suggestion was more constructive.

"As I already told Goldof and Fremy before, Chamo, Nashetania and I tried searching about the barrier's design."

Adlet and Hans nodded. While they were out looking at the edge of the barrier, Mora and the others had been reading the sacred words on the altar.

"First, I shall state our findings. There is no method for bringing down the barrier written in these sacred phrases. There is a possibility that a method exists, but at the moment we don't know."

"....Meoo, isn't that the worst?" Hans muttered.

"This means there are only two options available to us. The first is that the person who initiated the barrier themselves should be able to dissolve it. The other is that the barrier should dissolve if the very person who activated it dies."

"You're not mistaken?"

"It seems almost certain. In the first place, there aren't any theories that would explain a situation where even the person who activated the barrier couldn't dissolve it. It seems unlikely that the barrier will continue even if the person who activated it dies."

"I see..." Adlet recalled when the barrier was activated. The moment he opened the door the armored soldiers had come out and attacked him. The shrill laughter from the Kyoma behind him followed that. So in those moments someone had activated the barrier and then fled.

Who in the world were they and how did they do it?

"Is the person who activated the barrier still inside it?" Adlet asked Mora in the hopes of finding a foothold for his thoughts.

"They're here. No matter if they're human or Kyoma they absolutely can't get out of the barrier. So there have been no changes with the possible person who activated the barrier."

"Could they activate it from outside the temple?"

"That's impossible."

"Could the barrier only be activated by a human?"

Mora thought for a moment before answering. "It could only be a human. Kyoma shouldn't be able to enact a barrier that was made by Saints."

"In other words...there is a human who has allied with The Majin," Adlet said, but Mora strongly shook her head from side to side.

"It doesn't seem likely that such a person could be human. If The Majin fully revives, it will annihilate all humans. There's no one who would do something like that for any reason whatsoever."

"Well, at the very least a person like that is in this group," Adlet said.

"So Fremy is the enemy. Why don't you get that?" Chamo asked, astonished.

"That still hasn't been determined. I believe Fremy is our companion."

"But it doesn't seem like there is a human ally to The Majin among us other than Fremy." Mora craned her neck to the side.

"There is," Adlet strongly declared. "The Kyoma abducted a lot of people and are coercing them. There isn't anyone who would be able to continue refusing under those circumstances. So there are without a doubt humans that obey the Kyoma."

"...I understand Adlet. You're saying not to let our guards down," Mora said.

"...For quite a while," Suddenly Fremy began to speak. Shocked, everyone looked her way. "Mora is commenting on various things, but is what she's saying true?"

Mora glared at Fremy.

"I don't say things as speculation. Everything I have stated are errorless facts."

"That's not what I meant. I'm afraid there is no proof that you are genuine."

Mora was silent.

"I am not the impostor...the seventh person is not me. They are someone among you six. In my eyes, Mora, you are also nothing more than a suspect. You say that if the actual person who activated the barrier is killed then we can dissolve the barrier. You also mention how a Kyoma can't activate the barrier, but there's no guarantee that either of those are true."

Mora hesitated and Adlet felt like he'd been attacked with his guard down. Mora was a person with a verified identity, so he didn't doubt her. But Fremy was exactly right; there was no guarantee that what she was saying was the truth.

"...Fremy-san, I think what Mora-san has said is correct," Nashetania said.

"Yeah, Chamo thinks so too."

"Right. But you must not forget that one of us is an enemy and that one of us is lying."

"Fremy-san. Right now you're the most suspicious person here," Nashetania said.

"I am not the seventh. That is all I can say for now."

"Well then, who is the seventh?" To Goldof's question Fremy didn't answer.

Slowly the fear that an impostor was among them crept into their bodies. One of them was an enemy and that person was lying. Even if someone said something a bit trivial, they had to be doubted once. Conversely, if Adlet said something careless there was a possibility that he would be suspected. He had to be careful not to be deceived, placed under suspicion, or to mistake a lie for the truth.

Chamo then cut in to the conversation. "Hey, this has already become a pain for Chamo. So can't I just kill Fremy?"

"That again?"

Despite being a child, Chamo made Adlet angry.

"It's because it's being said over and over; if the imposter isn't Fremy then who could it be? At any rate, it goes without saying that Fremy also activated the barrier. So Giant, can you break her neck for me?"

Goldof shook his head. "Chamo-san. Fremy was right beside the princess and I when the barrier was activated. Even if she is the impostor, someone else activated the barrier."

"Right. Well let's get the information out of her by torture. Though Chamo's torture will be first, Chamo will do their best."

Chamo then touched the piece of green foxtail grass to her lips and a chill rushed down Adlet's spine. He didn't know how she used that piece of grass, but he did feel it was unbelievably terrifying.

"Wait! Stop!" Adlet shouted as he grasped the hilt of the sword at his waist.

"To...torture? You can't do that. Goldof, stop Chamo-san," Nashetania commanded, but Goldof looked hesitant.

"Princess, in order to protect you this can't be helped. Adlet take the princess outside."

"Goldof! What are you saying?!" Nashetania shouted as she clutched her head. Meanwhile, Chamo slowly approached Fremy.

Mora was also hesitating, but her reluctance didn't seem to be about stopping the situation. She just seemed flustered with Nashetania. However, the moment Adlet thought that fighting was going to be the only option, a completely unexpected voice spoke.

"Stop it now. I don't think Fremy is the seventh." It was Hans.

Shocked by the sudden outburst, Chamo removed the grass from her mouth.

"What are you saying, Cat-san?"

"Or perhaps I should say she's too suspicious."

"That's a weak excuse."

"Meow, well then let me be precise. Suppose that Fremy is the seventh, then why is Adlet alive?" Hans asked, but Chamo only looked doubtful. "If Fremy were the seventh then it's strange that Adlet wasn't killed. She should have also taken the opportunity to kill the princess who she had traveled with. And as far as I've heard, I think there have been multiple chances."

"That's..."

"The gathering of all seven would be the worst possible situation for Fremy. As the Six Flower killer she has kept her face and name separate. Wouldn't it be clear to her that she'd be tortured and killed?"

"You're right."

"From Fremy's point of view she had to avoid the gathering of the seven at all costs. Yet despite that, as Adlet has said she followed unnecessarily. If Fremy were the seventh then what in the world does she want to do?"

"...You have a point. If Fremy is the enemy then she's done far too many irrational actions," Mora said.

"That...may be so," Nashetania also agreed.

Adlet heaved a sigh of relief at the unexpected assistance.

"But the fact that Fremy is the most suspicious hasn't changed."

"Well that's true, but if she planned on deceiving us then I think she'd have done things a bit more cleverly?"

Chamo sadly stared at the foxtail grass in her hands. "So Chamo can't torture her?"

"Meow, for now you still can't."

"This is the first time a lot of people have talked back to Chamo." Feeling down, Chamo grew silent. It seemed like for the time being the danger in front of them had been evaded.

"...Well then what should we do now?" Mora asked, looking fed up from all commotion with the torture. They had been talking for a fairly long time but they'd made almost no progress.

Suddenly Nashetania pressed a hand to her forehead and sank down to the ground in a crouch.

"Princess!" Goldof let go of Fremy and rushed over to Nashetania and immediately after that Hans grabbed Fremy's chains.

"I'm alright...I was just a little dizzy," Nashetania said, and then tried to stand.

"Sit down. Don't push yourself," Adlet said.

And with her hand pressed to her forehead Nashetania knelt back down. Goldof then sidled up beside her and supported her. She looked pale, as if she were extremely tired. Even the first time she'd fought the Kyoma with Adlet she hadn't looked that frail.

She was an excellent warrior, but she had been raised without any discomfort, which made her emotionally fragile. The fact that one of her companions was an enemy was simply a situation she couldn't handle.

"I guess it can't be helped. Let's rest for a while," Mora said with a shrug. Though it wasn't a situation where they could rest, they each took a break.

Nashetania decided to rely on Goldof, so Adlet stood back up. When he did Mora beckoned him over. He complied and together they moved over to one of the corners of the temple.

"What's the matter, Mora?"

"Nothing in particular, really. I just thought you seemed to be the most sensible of the group."

"That's right. No matter what it is, I'm the best in the world."

"If you're the most sensible of the group then I'm worried about the future."

Mora sighed softly. "Why do you believe that Fremy is not the seventh?"

"I have no proof or anything. Just the impression I got from her when we were together."

"Wasn't that only half a day at most?"

"Nevertheless, what came across came across."

"That's a vague reason."

"I decided that I will trust her the first time I met her."

Mora looked like she was having trouble understanding. "...You're too young. And such youth that doesn't know doubt can also be dangerous."

"Thanks for the advice, but I don't intend on changing my mind."

"I feel uneasy about all this. Including you the heroes that assembled this time are all too young. You could even say that Chamo and Goldof are still children. I wonder if the Goddess of Fate made a mistake with her decisions."

That was certainly true. Adlet and Nashetania were still 18. And though Fremy and Hans's ages were unknown, they didn't seem that different from himself.

"There isn't only strength in experience. Youth also have the strength of youth."

"That's true, but..."

"You'll feel more at ease if you think like that. If you're pessimistic then you won't even be able to succeed at the things you should be able to."

"I see. I wonder if thinking like that is also the privilege of the young." Mora then smiled.

But thinking from the perspective of the common standards of the world, then Mora was also completely a young person. Though she strangely spoke in a way that aged her, he wondered just how old she really was.

"Don't try and guess a woman's age, idiot."

She was sharp, making Adlet smile a bit in embarrassment.

Nashetania then stood back up. The vitality had returned to her face and Adlet could see the desire to fight residing in her eyes.

"I'm calm now. Sorry for troubling everyone."

The seven scattered about the room returned to the altar. As they did, Goldof once again took in charge of guarding Fremy.

"Let's go outside. We have to pursue the one who activated the barrier. But first we should search for clues. Adlet explain to us in as much detail as possible what happened when the barrier was activated."

Mora urged everyone to head outside the temple and as Adlet walked out, Nashetania grabbed his hand.

"What's the matter, Nashetania?"

"Umm, please don't think of me as unreliable. I was just a little shaken up."

"I understand. You seemed more to be playing some kind of practical joke than experiencing a weak moment."

Nashetania made a tight fist and showed it to Adlet.

"I'll do my best."

"Making jokes?"

"No, with bringing down the barrier and searching for the seventh."

The seven exited the temple and in front of it Adlet told everyone about what had happened as far as he could remember. First he talked about the fallen shape-shifting Kyoma around the temple's salt pillars, how she'd urged him to enter the temple by pretending to be a woman, and how after that she'd revealed her true identity and ran away.

"That Kyoma knows something. If we could capture it and force it to confess..." Goldof said.

But after he'd spoken, Chamo's face changed into one of embarrassment. "Sorry, Chamo killed it. It had happened to flee to where Chamo was."

"Such excessive..." Goldof was shocked.

"Even if we'd caught them getting information out of them would probably have been impossible," Mora said, offering Chamo some assistance. "The Kyoma are loyal creatures. If they were ordered not to speak then they would absolutely not speak evil if they were going to be killed."

Adlet then continued his story, telling them about how the door was locked and how he blasted it open.

"Strange. It was locked? But I thought it was usual to bring a key in advance."

As Chamo craned her neck to the side, Mora withdrew a key from her breast. "I have it. Even Private First Class Rowen probably never thought this situation would happen."

Adlet again went on with his story, telling them about the two armored soldiers who came out and attacked him after he blew the door. That was the most baffling. Adlet had been attacked, but it didn't seem like it had been the Kyoma's underlings.

"This armor? I've been interested in it for a while." Nashetania picked up the fallen armor and looked inside. There were no people inside, they were just empty. "The inside of this armor is densely written with sacred writing. It's too complicated for me to read."

"These guards were made by the Saint of Seals. They would attack anyone who opened the door indiscriminately without the proper method," Mora explained.

"Wow, it was sealed awfully securely."

"The king of the Iron Islands that made this barrier is very secretive. In order to prevent the barrier from being misused he forbade both Kyoma as well as humans from entering this place."

"But it's being misused right now."

Despite being made with good intentions, they wouldn't be trapped within the forest if it weren't for the barrier. And now Adlet wanted to interrogate the person responsible for their current circumstance.

He was about to continue his story when he noticed Hans strangely peeking through the armor. Hans then looked carefully over to the broken door. His face looked serious, but before Adlet could ask him what the issue was, Mora urged him to continue.

"And after that?"

"Ah, when I opened the door the barrier had already been activated. I think the mist started to rise immediately after I blew open the door. And when I went inside the sword was already standing up in the pedestal."

"...So the barrier was activated right before you opened the door."

"And there wasn't a figure or shadow within the temple. Frankly, I couldn't believe it."

Upon hearing that Mora crossed her arms to think. "This doesn't seem like the act of a normal person. Without a doubt a Saint is involved."

"A Saint?...Why would a Saint collaborate with The Majin?"

"They were probably coerced. It is a tactic the Kyoma use often."

Adlet looked over to Mora. "Since you're the head of all the temples you'd probably know, so what Saint could be capable of doing such a thing?"

"...Illusions? No, that's impossible. They had a method to leave this place without even showing themselves to you once...No one like that easily comes to mind."

"Meow, Adlet!" Hans suddenly shouted out. "There's nothing wrong with your memory right?"

"I don't think so...What's the matter?"

"I see. I'll ask again. There's nothing wrong with your memory, right?"

Adlet was confused.

"If you want to correct your statement, now is the time. After this, even if you say you want to take it back it won't be so easy."

"Yup. What's the deal?"

"When you entered the temple, the sword was already inserted into the pedestal. You're not mistaken about that?"

"Right."

"I'll ask you one last time. You're not mistaken?"

"You're persistent. I'm saying I think I'm not mistaken. Why don't you believe me?"

At that moment Hans quietly placed his hand on the hilt of his sword at his waist. Whether or not he intended to draw it, Adlet wasn't sure, but his hand was on it.

"...I'm an assassin. So I'm like a specialist when it comes to sneaking into places and escaping them, meow."

"Oh. That is reliable," Mora said.

"For people in a trade like mine, the person we fear the most is the Saint of Seals. That's because when it comes to that Saint, she's made strange doors everywhere. The locks on those doors can't be opened, the person can't leave if the door is closed, and if the door is opened then iron grills would come down on that place. I've been in trouble countless times because of it. So I'm fairly well informed when it comes to that Saint's doors."

"So..."

"This door was made well. Instead of being terribly strong, it was constructed so that it couldn't be closed a second time after it was opened."

"Wait, what do you mean by that?"

"I'm the one asking the question, Adlet, and your story is strange. You said when you arrived here the door was closed and that you broke the door around the time the barrier was activated. If so, how did the person who activated the barrier get inside?"

"What are you implying?"

There were probably a number of ways a person could get in.

"Meow, Adlet. Before you broke the door it was impossible to enter the temple. It was absolutely impossible."

"Wait! That's not necessarily true."

Adlet entered the temple and searched for a ventilation window, but there was nothing of the sort. The lighting window was both made of thick glass and covered by iron bars. He then searched the stone walls, but found no marks anywhere where the stone could have been repaired.

Dumbfounded, he looked within the temple and thought about how the culprit could have escaped after activating the barrier. But he wasn't able to understand how they had entered before.

"Adlet, you will die unless you think as hard as you can. If no one should have been able to enter the temple, then how did the person who activated the barrier get in? Meow?"

"...that's..."

"The door can't close if it's opened once. And other than the door there are no exits. Do you think someone could enter the temple under these circumstances? Even if they went to a special Kyoma for help, Kyoma can't get near the temple. So someone must have entered the temple by human power alone."

"..."

"By the way, let me tell you one thing now. When you can't enter or exit a place, people like me call that a closed room¹."

A closed room. That unfamiliar phrase rushed about Adlet's head. And though he tried, he couldn't come up with any method to break into the room.

"They probably dug a hole. They removed the bedrock, dug a hole and infiltrated the room from there. Then they activated the barrier, escaped through the same hole when I was blowing open the door, and quickly filled it."

"Meow? In an instant? How?"

"There may be a Saint who has that kind of power, right? The Saint of the Earth or something," Adlet said as he searched for a trace of the hole.

But then Chamo said, "There's nothing there."

"Why do you think that?"

"When you and Hans were going to the edge of the barrier, Mora-obachan said there may be people hidden in the area. So Chamo used the power of the swamp and tried searching the ground and within the forest.

¹ In Japanese this phrase "closed room" is a single word, not a sentence describing a locked area. As such, in the next sentence Adlet is a bit unfamiliar with the phrase.

Chamo also has the power to search within the ground, but there were no traces that a hole had been dug in the ground."

The power of swamps... the ability to search underground? What in the world kind of power does she have?

"Adlet, I also saw where Chamo had been searching. I didn't think there was a hole dug there." Goldof said and Nashetania nodded. Adlet had no choice but to believe them.

"In addition, I shall say this. The Saint of Earth does not have that kind of power. And even with Chamo's abilities, to dig a hole and escape in an instant is not possible," Mora added.

And now with everyone denying his claim, Adlet also had no choice but to throw away the possibility that the person had dug a hole and escaped.

"It's alright if it wasn't a hole. But they did use some kind of Saint's power," Adlet said, turning around to Mora. "Mora, there's probably someone. There must be a Saint that has the kind of power to open the door and enter the temple."

"I'm sorry, but there isn't. The power of the Saint of Seals can't be broken. They could force the door open, but once opened the door can't be closed again."

"That can't be true, if there is no Saint power then no one...can enter this temple," Adlet said, then took a moment to think. "There are unknown Saints. Those raised by Kyoma, just like Fremy."

"No there aren't. My mother told me that I was the only child born from a Kyoma and a human," Fremy said in a cool-headed voice.

As Adlet looked her way he saw Hans had been silently drawing his sword, and Chamo was touching the foxtail grass to her lips.

"Stop it Hans, Chamo. Let's continue to talk a bit more. It's too early to make a decision." Mora said as she stopped the two, but at the same time she looked at Adlet suspiciously.

"...Huh? Um, I really don't understand what you're implying," Nashetania said, flustered. "What are you saying everyone? Goldof? Hans-san? Mora-san? Adlet-san?"

As the tension was gradually increasing, only Nashetania didn't understand the situation.

"...I'll tell you princess. Right now, Adlet is under suspicion."

"Meow, that's right. Furthermore I suspect it is definitive."

"Why!? That's impossible! Adlet-san is the only one who is definitely not the enemy!" Nashetania's shouts seemed to be coming from far away.

"Meow, that's not true because until Adlet opened the door no one could enter the temple. If no one was able to enter other than Adlet then who do you think activated the barrier?"

"It's not Adlet-san! That's some kind of falsehood!"

Hans shouldered quivered as he laughed. "You're so heartless for deceiving her, Adlet. Shouldn't you do your best to clear away the suspicion, meow?"

"I'm shocked our positions have changed so quickly," Fremy said. Even Goldof who was holding Fremy's restraints was staring at Adlet with a cautious gaze.

"Until a while ago that man has stood up for you, Fremy. What do you think about helping him out?"

"I can't help him. And I have no intentions of doing so," Fremy replied coldly to Mora's instigation.

"The door..." Adlet choked out. "The culprit opened the door once and entered. Then he unhinged the door that can't be opened and closed, made a new door and sealed the temple. And after that the culprit hid within the temple.

"When I came in front of the temple the culprit activated the barrier. Then when I opened the door they steadily escaped outside! If so, then it's possible for them to have broken in and escaped!"

It was a flimsy explanation and after hearing it Hans burst out into laughter. It was as if he were scoffing at Adlet, 'what was that? Was that the only thing you could come up with'.

"...This door was created by the previous Saint of Seals. The current Saint is still inexperienced and it would be very impossible for her to create an impressive door like this!"

"What's wrong with that? The previous Saint probably made it right?" Adlet's voice was cracking and he couldn't conceal his panic.

"The previous Saint's death was four years ago. It's impossible for anyone other than her to have furnished that door."

They had even denied his desperate suggestion.

So then at that moment without thinking, Adlet shouted, "You're the seventh."

There was no longer any other possibility. The story about the door, the Saint, all of it was a lie. Anything other than a lie was impossible.

"Unfortunately, Adlet," Mora began, "Hans story is all fact."

Adlet could no longer think of anything to retort.

Trembling, Nashetania said, "It's...it's a lie. Adlet-san, this ...this is nonsense."

She was the only one who still believed he was innocent. *Why is this happening?*

It was a trap. Adlet had been caught in a trap. The seventh hadn't only trapped them inside the barrier. They had also set a trap that led to the Six Flower companions killing one another.

"Well then, what should we do? Share your thoughts with me everyone."

"Thoughts about what?!" Adlet shouted, but Mora did not reply. She didn't need to. The thoughts she wanted to hear about were whether Adlet was the culprit or not. Or whether to kill him or let him live.

"Of course I think Adlet is the culprit. Let's eliminate him immediately," Hans said.

"I object. Kill Adlet-san? There's no way we can do that!" Nashetania shouted.

"Well, Chamo is still interested in Fremy. But even all this talk hasn't been lost on Chamo. So for now, shall Chamo try torturing Adlet?" Chamo giggled. *Was she serious or did she intend it as a joke?*

"I think Hans' thinking is correct. But it'll be better to kill him after examining the situation a bit more," After Mora spoke the five's gazes fell onto Goldof and the shackled Fremy whose chains he was holding.

Fremy spoke first. "I have no opinion. Do what you want."

"Fremy..." Adlet ground his teeth. He wished she had stuck up for him a little...just a little bit.

"I see. How about you Goldof?"

Goldof closed his eyes and thought for a short while. At the same time he loosened his hold on Fremy's restraints.

"Goldof... you understand right? Adlet-san cannot be the enemy," Nashetania said.

Goldof then opened his eyes and said, "My thoughts are this..." while simultaneously drawing the spear strapped to his back. Then in an instant he closed the distance between himself and Adlet.

"Goldof!" Nashetania shouted.

Adlet tried to jump to the side to escape Goldof's attack, but he was just a little too slow. He barely dodged the spear, but he was still flung back by the giant's thrust and crashed into the temple wall.

At the same time Hans had drawn his sword and just before Goldof's strike, Hans started to leap towards Adlet. During that time Adlet couldn't think of anything, but if he could he would have wondered how in the world Hans moved like that.

Whether it was warrior's instinct, unconscious conditioned reflexes, or maybe just fate, Adlet's hand moved and drew something from one of his pouches. Of all the secret tools he had drawn out from his pouches, the one he was now holding was the most excellent. At just a glance it would seem like nothing more than some kind of metal wrapped in paper. But when he squeezed it the special chemicals and the fragments of rare metal within the paper touched and caused a chemical reaction.

"Hah!" The item released an intense light, several times stronger than looking directly at the sun. It was likely that a smokescreen would not be effective against the likes of Hans and Goldof, but both of them would be unable to deal with that one unknown attack.

Everyone covered their eyes and bent away from the light. And within that moment Adlet's head wildly twisted about as he searched for a way to get away from the six. Though he wasn't sure if the idea that came to him was correct or not, a period for him to continue thinking wasn't presenting itself.

So Adlet ran. He ran towards Fremy. Towards Fremy whose wrists were bound and whose body was wrapped in chains...chains that had just been released from Goldof's grasp.

In order to win he would exhaust all possible means. He would use everything in his surroundings. By no means could he afford not to choose the tool he needed. And that was the conviction he had behind calling himself the world's strongest man. Whether that conviction was correct was a different story, but regardless he conducted himself solely by that principle.

When Hans and the others regained their vision, Adlet was carrying Fremy on his shoulder. A sleeping dart was sticking into her and Adlet's sword was pressed to the back of her neck.

"Nobody move. If you move, I'll stab her," Adlet said, the tip of his sword having already pierced her neck a bit.

As if frozen, the five surrounding Adlet stopped moving. This was his only option. He only had two sleeping darts and his other secret weapons definitely wouldn't have been able to open up an opportunity.

"It's not true...this," Nashetania's sword slid out from her hands and sank to the floor.

"So this means the secret's out," Mora said.

"Me, meow. This is more than I expected."

Adlet and the troubled five glared at one another. Yet the problem at hand for Adlet was Hans blocking the exit.

"Get out of the way."

"You say get out of the way, but I won't, Meow. You said don't move, now you want me to move."

"Alright then, don't move. Stay there."

"What should I do, huh?" Silently Hans aimed to strike Adlet's neck, but Adlet didn't present him with a chance to strike.

"Leave it to Chamo," she said and moved the foxtail grass to her lips.

But Mora stopped her. "Wait. With your power you'll get Fremy too. That can't happen."

"Well then, what should we do?"

Getting tired of waiting, Adlet shouted, "Who allowed you to consult with people?! Choose Hans! Move out the way or don't move."

"Meo, meow! I got it, I'll move so don't yell!" Hans said and moved a step away from the door.

The next instant Adlet released his second flash pellet. Again everyone excluding Adlet covered their eyes. But of course, as it was the second time he'd used the attack, it was less effective than before.

Still holding Fremy, Adlet went out the door. And at that moment he felt a shock rush through his back. Hans had thrown his sword into Adlet's back.

"Guh."

This time Adlet threw down a smokescreen pellet, stopping Hans and the others from chasing after him. And using only the secret weapons he had on hand, Adlet fled.

He passed the salt pillars and entered the forest. Then he ran, ran, and continued to run. He continued to dash away from the sound of the footsteps pursuing right behind him.

His back was burning in pain. However, he couldn't remove the sword. If he removed the blade, then blood would gush out and he'd soon be unable to move. So running with the sword stuck in him was his only option to get away.

"...Shit." While he ran Adlet wondered if what he'd done was alright. But it wasn't. After what he'd done not even one person believed he was still innocent. However, in order to survive he didn't have any other options.

He wondered how many hours he'd run. The mist was tinted a faint red and before long was replaced by dusk. The sun was starting to set.

Before he knew it he could no longer hear the others' footsteps. Adlet then halted, lowered Fremy from his shoulder, and slumped down to the ground.

Once he slipped down to a kneel he found he couldn't move another step. Blood wasn't circulating around his head and his thoughts were disordered. Before Fremy wakes up he had to remove the sword and stop the bleeding. After that he'd have to stab another sleeping dart into her. Besides those tasks he also had to also prepare for the others.

But his body could no longer move. Adlet then collapsed onto the ground and started to lose consciousness.

His lips moved slightly. *If you lose consciousness that will be the end*, he told himself. However, Adlet's consciousness was sinking into darkness as if it were being pulled in.

What are you doing Adlet Maia? You are the strongest man in the world, right? You can't die in a place like this. As his mind muttered those words, he stretched his hand to his back.

But the hand that tried to remove the sword fell feebly to the ground. And with that last movement, Adlet stopped moving.

Part Three

Through the dark forest, Hans ran in search of Adlet.

"Hans! That's far enough! The sun has gone down." Within the Illusion Fog Barrier, now enveloped by darkness, Mora's voice resounded through the air.

Hans stopped and replied, "Meow? What careless nonsense are you saying?"

"It's dangerous to go any farther. Adlet is a man who will use tactics against you that you'll never expect. His domain is within the darkness."

"Even though I was beaten like that and Fremy will be killed?"

"Hans. Show me your crest. Since mine is on my back I can't see it."

"And why do you want to see it?" Hans lifted his shirt and showed her the crest on his chest.

"Fremy hasn't been killed yet, which means Adlet still considers Fremy to have value as a hostage."

"How do you know that?"

"Try looking at your crest."

Hans looked at the crest on his chest. It was giving off a faint light, different from how it looked before.

"There was no time to explain before, but there are six petals right? If one of the Heroes of the Six Flowers dies a petal will fade. This is how we can know whether our companions are alive or not."

"I didn't know that."

"Goldof, Chamo, and the princess are going back to the temple now. Let's return too."

Looking unconvinced, Hans followed behind Mora. When they arrived at the temple they found the remaining three waiting for them.

"It's no good. We completely lost sight of him. That guy is extremely fast."

"Even with a sword stabbed to his back he was still able to move like that. He's a tough opponent."

Mora sighed. "There's nothing we can do... We'll search again tomorrow. Until then, let's pray Fremy is still alive."

After that Mora leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. Each of the others rested how they wished, except for Nashetania who was crouching and clutching her head.

"...Adlet-san...Why? Why would you do this?"

#

The seventh had been shocked by Adlet's fleeing speed, his quick-witted thinking and luck. [They'd] never imagined that he would be able to safely escape from being surrounded like that. It seemed to the seventh that it was a mistake to judge Adlet as inferior in comparison to the other Flowers.

However, it was an issue of little significance. No matter which path Adlet took he was still checkmated. Now the only thing Adlet was waiting on was for one of the others to kill him.

So the seventh would let Adlet roam free for a while. There was no need to rush.

#

As the five were ending their pursuit of Adlet and heading back to the temple, Adlet was sprawled on the ground losing consciousness. Within that darkness, Adlet had a dream. It was an old and nostalgic dream from when he was a child...

Shouting, Adlet raised a piece of wood overhead. With a small stick wrapped in cotton he tried to strike the boy in front of him. But the boy easily dodged his attack and in return struck Adlet's shoulder with his own stick.

Adlet screamed and dropped his weapon.

"Hahaha, another total defeat for Adlet." The boy laughed. His name was Raina, Adlet's friend who was three years older than him.

They were at a small village, deep in the mountains in Aurora, the Nation of the White Lake. It was also an ordinary place where the fifty or so villagers lived by raising sheep, making wheat, and harvesting mountain mushrooms. And it was exactly because his hometown was ordinary that Adlet thought it was so precious. Its name was Hasuna.

In a corner of the grazing fields where sheep were running about, Adlet and Raina had been training in sword fighting. They were the only boys in the village and when they found the time they would go around swinging sticks wrapped in cotton.

Rumors that the Majin's revival was fast approaching even reached a remote village like Hasuna. The Wailing Demon Territory wasn't that far from the village and they thought that perhaps the Kyoma from that region would come and attack. So the boys organized a defense force consisting just the two of them.

"Adlet, get stronger. At this rate you couldn't even beat my mother, let alone the

Kyoma." Raina said as he used his arms to lock the bruise-covered Adlet in a hold. "Well, don't you wish my old lady was in the defense force?"

"What are you saying!? Me and you are the defense force," Adlet grumbled as he massaged his wounded body.

In reality Adlet didn't have any interest in participating in the defense force with Raina. At any case, the Kyoma wouldn't come because the Heroes of the Six Flowers would defeat The Majin for them. And if the Kyoma did come, it would be alright for them to turn tail and flee. That's what Adlet was thinking, but he couldn't flat-out refuse a request from his only friend.

"Raina! Where are you? I know you're playing with Ad!" A voice was calling to Raina from far away. It was his mother coming for him since he was playing hooky from helping at the wheat fields. Raina, however, stuck out his tongue and fled in the opposite direction of his mother.

For Adlet, it was a terrible day. And since he was associated with the defense force, he was also forced into the role of calming down Raina's angry mother.

"Ah, welcome home. You must be worn-out."

When Adlet returned to his home made of stone, the smell of mushroom stew and the voice of a woman in her mid-twenties greeted him. Her name was Shetra and she was Adlet's guardian.

"Sis, Raina told us that she wouldn't put up with another sparring session."

"Personally I think it's alright. And even Raina isn't saying that out of ill will."

"I'm fed up. It's okay if I don't become strong. Besides, I hate fighting," Adlet complained as he placed a cloth over the table. As he did so, a delicious smell wafted over from the center of the house.

"Aren't these flower umbrella mushrooms¹ ? They're perfect. Ingredients have been scarce recently."

After Raina ran off, Adlet had entered the forest and plucked mushrooms. That day he got his hands on a number of mushrooms he didn't find often. Finding delicious mushrooms was Adlet's hobby and his number one special skill.

Shetra sliced up the mushrooms and when she added them to the stew a savory smell like seared meat drifted towards him.

Three years ago, Adlet lost his parents and Shetra lost her shepherd husband to an epidemic. Shetra took Adlet in and after that the two lived together under the same roof and depended on each other. Shetra sheared the sheep's wool and Adlet made cheese from the sheep's milk. The two of them made their living off of selling those products to the other villagers.

¹ <http://trace.kinokoyama.net/fungi/fungi-zukan/hanagasatake-fungi.htm>

It was a memory from when Adlet Maia was ten years old. At that time he'd been content.

Shetra hugged the boy who lost his parents close and made Adlet smile again. Adlet loved the smell of dirt and domesticated² animals that had seeped into her skin.

And despite being a difficult person, Raina was also his dear friend. Even though Adlet was fed up with participating in the self-defense force with just the two of them, Adlet understood well that in his own way Raina cared about Adlet and the town.

The other villagers were good people too. They all said his poorly made cheese was good and bought it from him, even though it would have been much more delicious if Shetra had made it.

At that time Adlet was truly an ordinary boy. He never thought he could become a Hero of the Six Flowers. In fact, not even once did he even think he wanted to become one of the heroes. He was skilled in getting mushrooms. Back then his goal in life was to be able to make even more delicious cheese.

He had believed that those kinds of days would continue forever....

But that was a dream, a dream of a time that had completely passed away.....³

² Farm is probably a more natural word, but they don't actually live on a farm

³ Technically the word is passed, but it can also be used for when a person dies. I think here the author is trying to play with those double meanings

"Why did you come here?"

The scene of his dream shifted and now he was at a house in the middle of the forest.

Located within the luxuriant and dense forest, the place didn't seem like a home that had been fashioned and built into a cave. And inside, one man was sitting cross-legged on the floor.

"Atro Spyker, I heard that if I'm taught by you I'll become stronger."

Adlet had a tragic appearance. His clothes were worn out and his body thin and emaciated. Both of his hands were covered in blood and like a corpse, only bitterness remained in his eyes.

"Go back down the mountain. If you want to become strong then join the knights. And if you're a commoner, join the mercenaries," The old man...Atro said in a quiet, husky voice.

"That won't work. It will make me stronger, but I won't be able to become the world's strongest."

"...World's strongest?" Atro's brow shook. However, Adlet couldn't tell exactly what expression he was making because of his thick eyebrows.⁴

⁴ 眉が揺れる。その表情は眉毛に覆われて解らない。

"By ordinary means I can't be the world's strongest or anything like that. In order to become the strongest, I have to stray from the normal path. I will become the strongest man in the world. And after I've done so, I will defeat the Kyoma."

"Why do you want to be strong?"

To the old man's question, Adlet answered, "To take back what was stolen from me. More than anyone, more than anyone, I have to become strong and be able to get back what I've lost."

"Give up," Atro cruelly said. "You can't take back what you've lost. Give up and continue to live."

"That's not true," Adlet shouted. "I must take it back! If I don't, what reason will I have to continue living!? If I don't defeat The Majin and can't fight the Kyoma then there'll be no value in my living."

For a short while Atro stared into Adlet's eyes and thought, "Do you take me for a fool? Do you think it's easy to become the world's strongest?"

With a face covered in tears, Adlet said, "I don't care if you make fun of me. I don't care if you laugh at me. I will continue to want to become the world's strongest man. I will continue to shout that I will become the world's strongest man. If I don't then how can I become strong!?"

Atro looked up to the sky as if thinking about something. Then he slowly stood. And after that he kicked Adlet in the stomach, knocking him to the ground. The blow knocked the wind out of Adlet and even with an empty stomach, he could feel the bile welling up within him.

Atro kicked him in his sides and his back over and over again. Then he stepped on Adlet's face and pressed it into the ground.

"Laugh," he said.

"...Huh...lau..." Even though he tried to answer back, the words wouldn't come. He was in so much pain he thought he would die.

"If you want to become strong, laugh." Atro's foot dug into Adlet's back.

"The sad times when you want to die. The painful times when you want to abandon everything and run away. The times of despair when you can't see the sun. A person that can laugh can become strong even in all these moments."

Adlet bent his quivering lip. His cheeks were twitching, drool was dripping from his mouth and by no means did it appear like he was smiling. But even so Adlet laughed.

Atro then continued to beat Adlet. When he kicked Adlet's face blood spurted out from his nose. When he kicked his stomach what came out from his mouth was a mixture of blood and vomit. Regardless, Atro never stopped.

Spewing bloody vomit, his nose bleeding, and tears falling down his face, Adlet laughed. And that was the first fighting skill Atro taught him.

#

Adlet awoke. It had been a fuzzy and wandering dream.

"...Uh."

He was in the forest, shocked that he was still alive.

Huh?

When he'd fallen he was sure he had been face down, but now he was lying face up with a tree root serving as his pillow.

He tried to touch his back, but the blade that should have been stuck in his flesh wasn't there. His wound had been treated, the opening stitched shut, and the entire area wrapped in bandages.

I wonder who treated my wound. Maybe Nashetania found me.

"You're awake," a voice said. Within the darkness shrouded in fog, Adlet could faintly see Fremy's figure.

"It missed your vitals, so if you rest you'll be able to move soon."

"You treated my wound?" Adlet asked as he sat up.

"That's right."

"Why?" Fremy must have also thought that Adlet was the seventh. And for starters, they had a turbulent relationship since they first met. He didn't know of any reason why she would help him.

"I'm 99% sure that you're the seventh. But I don't completely believe it. So I'm just taking precautions for that remaining percent."

"...It's the truth. I'm genuine. I came to fight The Majin."

"Right. I don't believe you," Fremy said and then looked away.

Silence fell between them and the forest at night was quiet. Adlet wondered if perhaps the other five had given up searching for him since there was no sign of any pursuit.

So what should I do now? No matter what I have to prove my innocence. But how?

"It's pitiful, but I have no idea how the culprit entered the temple."

"Probably so since you are the culprit."

"Was what Hans said true? Was there really no way to open that door?"

"I don't know as much as Hans, but I do know a little about the Saint of Seals too. I don't think what he said was incorrect."

"..."

"And Mora also said no. There isn't a way to enter the temple."

If that were so then really nothing came to mind. If it were possible then that would mean Hans, Mora, and Fremy were all accomplices. But only one of the seven was an enemy, the others were genuine.

It was impossible for the Heroes of the Six Flowers to continue onward while being complicit with the enemy. In other words, if multiple people agreed on an opinion then without a doubt what they agreed upon was the truth.

"Maybe the culprit is Mora," Adlet said. She had said that there wasn't a Saint who could break into the closed room. But if her testimony was a lie then what? If she were an accomplice to the Saint that infiltrated the temple, then what?

"It may be possible. But you can't prove it without capturing the culprit that infiltrated the temple and showing their abilities to everyone."

"No, there may be Saints that even she doesn't know about. She didn't know about you, so she can't say there aren't any unknown Saints."

"It's the same thing. Without capturing the Saint you can't prove the crime."

So somehow or another he had to capture the culprit that activated the barrier.

"Alright, let's get this straight. First there are two enemies, but in addition one was among the seven that had gathered and another is the person that infiltrated the temple and activated the barrier."

There was no mistake about that. Other than Adlet, it was impossible for any of the other six to activate the barrier. When the barrier was activated, Fremy, Nashetania, and Goldof had been fighting with the Kyoma.

Mora and Hans were on their way to the temple. Chamo's whereabouts were the only ones he didn't know, but testimony was given stating that even with her power it would have been impossible to break into the temple.

"The person who possesses a crest and slipped in among us is the seventh. Let's call the person who activated the barrier the eighth. Of course they are working with the Kyoma. Meanwhile the Kyoma lured the Six Heroes to the temple by dropping bombs, and attacked us in order to separate myself from you and the others. It was an amazingly thorough plan."

"...But questions remain. Why is the seventh here? If their plan was to trap us in the barrier then they could have succeeded without being among us."

"That's idiotic.⁵ If the seventh weren't here then I wouldn't have been made out to be the impostor. Trapping us wasn't the plan, the plan was to frame and kill me."

"I never thought of that because I think you're the seventh."

She was participating in the conversation, but it didn't seem she thoroughly believed him. He thought after convincing her that she would become her ally, but somehow even that seemed unlikely.

⁵ The Japanese translates directly to Idiot or a catch-all for most Japanese expletive name-calling, but this is a very strong word to call someone and I don't think Adlet is trying to be hostile with Fremy

"For the time being it's alright to put off matters related to the seventh. Our highest priority is finding the eighth."

"Can you find them all by yourself?"

Adlet was forced into silence. He would have to search for the enemy whose power and true identity he didn't know while shaking off the other five's pursuit. Of course it was unlikely that the eighth was just strolling about the area. They were probably hiding so that they wouldn't be found.

Is such a plan possible? Or is it just impossible after all, Adlet wondered. But every time Adlet believed something was impossible, it made him smile. And once again his mouth widened into a grin and he felt exhilarated.

"You're a strange man. Why are you smiling?"

"Naturally, my ability to smile is because I'm the strongest man in the world." Adlet balled his hands into fists.

"Even a terrible situation like this won't put even a little dent in your spirit?"

Laugh at despair. That was the first thing his master Atro had taught him.

"Tomorrow will be fun. Tomorrow will be the day I smash the enemy's scheme into pieces. Tomorrow will also be the day I prove both my innocence and that I'm the world's strongest at the same time. I can't wait for the sun to rise."

Adlet continued to laugh. He had no idea about the eighth's true identity and it didn't seem likely that he could escape from the others, but if he didn't laugh then it was all over.

"It's a delusion."

"No, it's determination."

While he laughed, Adlet thought about the eighth's true identity and their power. He scoured his memory for some clue, or some unnatural item he'd overlooked.

And suddenly after a while, Fremy spoke. "Why did you set out to be one of the Six Flowers?"

Why? It was a fresh surprise. All this time Fremy had been indifferent about her companions, making that moment probably the first time she'd had any interest in someone else.

"Why are you asking something like that?"

"Because you're just an ordinary person."

"..."

"Hans is gifted, and so is Goldof. But you're different. You're only an ordinary person who uses a lot of unusual weapons."

"...Are you saying I'm weak? Me? The strongest man in the world?"

"That's not what I'm saying. How could an ordinary person like you become as strong as you have? That is my question."

Adlet didn't answer. Hans and Goldof and the like were talented, but he was just an ordinary person. He couldn't deny that. His normal sword skill and martial art ability were no match for them.

"...It's thanks to my teacher," Adlet said. "Now I say that, but my master was a crazy man. He was obsessed with defeating the Kyoma and nothing else. He didn't seem human."

"..."

"I had fighting tactics driven into me. Every day I trained until I was vomiting and couldn't move. And when that was over, as if tied to my desk I studied from how to make secret weapons and poisons, how to refine gunpowder, all the way to the leading scientific knowledge."

"...Science? You studied that much?"

"I'm grateful for my master and I was able to become stronger thanks to him. Without his unconventional fighting tactics I wouldn't have been able to become the world's strongest."

"I know that man."

Adlet looked at Fremy's face.

"Atro Spyker. He was one of my targets for elimination. But since he was old, he was a low priority."

"Right. That's him."

"I've heard that all of his pupils ran away. They couldn't tolerate his cruel training."

"That information is mistaken. I alone didn't run."

"How were you able to put up with it?"

Adlet didn't answer.

"There was something, right? Some reason you had to set out to become a Hero of the Six Flowers?"

Suddenly Adlet recalled the time he'd spoken with Nashetania in the jail. She had asked this and that, but Adlet hadn't answered everything.

There were things that were too gloomy; things he couldn't say easily.

"...When I was a child, a single Kyoma came to my village." And yet for some reason Adlet naturally began to talk about the past. "I couldn't believe it. I had thought the Kyoma existed in a faraway world. My friend tried to beat it with his single stick, but crying I froze."

"What kind of Kyoma was it?"

"It was in the shape of a human. Its body had green and flesh colored spots. At the time it seemed so huge that it pierced the heavens, but I don't think it was probably that tall. It was about the size of Goldof."

"Probably had three wings right? Crow-like wings sticking out from its back?"

That was right. "Do you know it?"

"Continue your story," Fremy replied.

"...It didn't attack the people, nor did it eat the people. It just smiled and approached my friend and I. Then it caressed my head. Gently, unbelievably gently."

That Kyoma called the village adults to gather in one place. My sister and I had said we were sleeping, but there was no way we could sleep. I was just trembling in my sister's arms.

"And then?"

"The next morning the Kyoma was gone. There were no injured, let alone people who had been killed. I was relieved. But after that the village chief spoke, telling everyone that the village would migrate to The Wailing Demon Territory and be subject to The Majin's rule."

"..."

"The adults were unanimously saying things like 'The world of humans was over. The Heroes of the Six Flowers absolutely couldn't win'. And they all also believed that allying with The Majin was the only way to save their lives. They had only talked for one night, but it was like the people of the village had become different people."

"I didn't know what I should do. I was just scared and shaking. Only my sister and my friend opposed the idea.

"But the Kyoma had also said something else. It said to gouge out the hearts of anyone who opposed the idea and bring them to The Majin as a sign of the villagers pledging their loyalty."

"That sounds like something it would say."

So she knew that Kyoma after all.

"What kind of being is it?"

"All the Kyoma are governed by three elder Kyoma. He's one of them. He's also the one who came up with the idea to create a child from a Kyoma and Human and ordered my mother to give birth to me."

"..." Adlet was silent.

"Continue your story."

"Until the end the two of them did not hate the villagers. The Kyoma was the bad one, not them. My friend had said, 'Don't hate the villagers.' And my sister gave reasons saying, 'After things return to normal, surely we would all live happily together once again'. They said I'd pick mushrooms again. And Raina had said we could make a defense force together again."

"...What happened to them?"

"My friend died protecting me. My sister died allowing me to escape. I'm the only one who survived." Adlet said, but then stopped short. "Why am I even telling you this? Right, it's because that was the reason I got stronger," Adlet said as he closed his eyes and saw their faces floating in his mind.

"When I told that story to my master he had said that I was able to become strong thanks to my sister and my friend. Someday things will absolutely return things to normal. Someday again you'll be able to live together in harmony. Because you believe in those words even now, you have been able to become strong. People that seek revenge can't become strong, only people that have something to believe in can."

Fremy didn't say a word.

"Is that enough?"

It was an unexpectedly long conversation, but the night was long. And there was plenty of time to talk.

"I'm jealous," Fremy said.

Adlet couldn't believe his ears. "Just now, what did you say?"

"I said I'm jealous."

Adlet forgot about the pain in his back, stood, and extended his hand to his sword at his waist. "What did you say? There's no way you said you're jealous right?"

"I'm jealous. I don't even have something to believe in."

Speechless, Adlet removed his hand from his sword and sat back down.

"The person dearest to me abandoned me."

"...What do you mean?"

"The Kyoma that birthed and raised me. She was the Kyoma that gave me my gun, the power of the Saint of Gunpowder, and happiness. And then she abandoned me."

Adlet was completely still and didn't make a single sound to show that he was paying attention.⁶ He just left telling her story up to her discretion.

"It's just like I said earlier. I was raised and surrounded by Kyoma. They weren't like the ones you defeated today. They had wisdom, courage, and were loyal to The Majin. I had loved them. And I had thought they all loved me too."

"By my mother's command I killed many people. I never had any questions. On the contrary, I had thought I had to do my best to kill people.

"I am half of a Kyoma with dirty human blood within me. So I thought I had to try harder than any other Kyoma to serve The Majin. Even half of a Kyoma would be recognized as a full Kyoma if they killed a lot of humans. That's what I believed."

After saying that Fremy's expression seemed more childlike than ever.

"But I had understood that I couldn't contribute to The Majin, no matter how many small fish I killed. The six strongest people in the world, those were the fish I had to ruin. Nashetania and Mora were closely guarded so I couldn't get near them. So I decided to challenge Chamo.

"I had believed that I would be recognized as a full Kyoma if I could defeat Chamo."

⁶ In Japanese, listeners make sounds to indicate that they understood and are following what the speaker is saying. If they do not, the speaker assumes that they do not understand. In this case, Adlet is so shocked he cannot say anything, so it is up to Fremy to believe if he understands or not.

"...You lost."

"I regret it. I wished I had gone after Nashetania or Mora, rather than fight her. I didn't stand a chance, and I couldn't do anything but run. On top of that, I also screwed up. Rising to the challenge, I had gone so far as to identify myself to Chamo."

Adlet couldn't even imagine what kind of fight it had been.

"And when I'd barely managed to return with my life...my mother tried to kill me. So did the other Kyoma who I had thought were my companions. You see, I had already served my purpose. And maybe I still wish that I had died then. But I managed to get away."

Fremy stroked her forehead. It was where her horn had been, a scar that was proof she was a Kyoma.

"...What I can't forgive is not that they tried to kill me. It's that they pretended to love me. If I were just some doll to be used, then I understand that even if they betrayed me they wouldn't think it was painful. So if they had just planned to betray me from the beginning then I wish they had raised me in that manner. I wish they had just raised me as a slave to fight humans. My mother...my mother..." Fremy balled her hands into fists. "My mother pretended to love me."

"...Revenge?"

"I wouldn't be satisfied by just killing her. I have to destroy the thing my mother risked her life for. I won't feel satisfied unless I kill The Majin. If I do that then I can tell my mother to feel regret. I can tell her that what I'd done was the result of what she did to me."

When Adlet had first met Fremy he'd intended to leave her alone, and now he finally understood the reason. She was like him. The pain she bore was the same as his own. It was the pain of being betrayed by the people you believed in and losing the place where you could return to. It was a pain of hatred that burned the body.

Revenge is meaningless. Revenge is making a mistake. Revenge produced nothing. There were a lot of people who said things like that. But they didn't understand. Revenge wasn't done because there was meaning or because it was right, or because one could get something from it. It was done because the person couldn't do anything else.

"At that time I had been content. My mother was there and my friends were there. We played together and we fought together. I had a dog then as well. I wonder what happened to him⁷. Is he still receiving food or was he abandoned too?" Fremy continued to speak, but it seemed more as if she were talking to herself.

"Hey Fremy."

⁷ The Japanese doesn't specify the dog's sex, however it seems unlikely that she would refer to her beloved pet as "it".

"What?"

"Whatever it is, give it your all."

He intended it as encouragement from the heart, but probably a little of it was him saying he was happy for her. However, her response was a gaze more full of doubt than coldness.

"Adlet, why don't you doubt me?"

"Huh?"

"Why does my story seem like the truth? Aren't you considering the possibility that I made it up?"

"What are you saying Fremy?"

"If you say you are genuine then I should be the person who you distrust the most. From your point of view, I'm the most suspicious person, no matter how you think about it."

"That certainly may be so."

“In the case that you are genuine then the first thing you should do is find proof that I am the seventh. However you aren’t. That alone is enough reason to suspect you.”

Adlet thought it was a strange theory, but he understood that from her standpoint it wasn’t illogical.

“That, uh...” Adlet searched for an answer. Various words came up in his mind, but none of them seemed suitable. He couldn’t aptly put his feelings into the right words.

He then recalled when he’d first encountered Fremy. It seemed like an extremely long time ago, but in reality it was just that morning. The feelings he'd felt then were the ones he desperately expressed in words now.

“I don’t want to think you are the enemy.”

“...I can’t understand. Neither from the standpoint of you being genuine nor even if you’re the seventh.”

“Huh? Don’t get the wrong idea Fremy. It’s not because I particularly like you or anything.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. Don’t say gross things like that,” Fremy spat out.

"I can't understand. I really absolutely can't understand you." As she said that, suddenly Fremy stood. "I will return to the temple. Perhaps the others have gathered there."

"You're leaving?"

"Of course."

Fremy's figure then disappeared into the darkness. Talking about each of their pasts, he felt they were able to understand one another a little bit. But perhaps even that was a moment's hallucination.

"Do you want to come with me?" Adlet called into the darkness.

Fremy stopped and thought for a moment. "We've talked about various things, but the fact that you're the most suspicious hasn't changed after all."

"...I see."

"But, for just one time I'll listen to what you have to say."

From the darkness Fremy threw something at him. It was a small firecracker made from a ball of gunpowder.

“It was made with my ability....the power of the God of Gunpowder. If you throw it to the ground it will explode. And if you do that, no matter where it happens, I’ll know.”

“Are you saying that I can call you if I use this?”

“Don’t misunderstand. This doesn’t mean that I trust you. The next time I see your face may be the time I kill you.”

“...”

“Use it or don’t use it, that’s up to you.” And with that Fremy disappeared into the darkness.

While staring into the darkness Adlet thought about the conversation he'd had with Fremy. From their talk there was only one thing that he'd confirmed. Fremy was absolutely not the enemy. It wasn't her reasons that he believed, but her heart.

He wanted to protect her...From the Majin...From the seventh.

“Fremy. I will protect you. And not just you, Nashetania, and the other companions too. Because I can protect everyone.”

There was no reply.

Adlet laid back down, looked up at the dark sky covered by the mist and thought of the past.

He thought back to five years ago, a time when, under Atro's guidance, he was bit by bit approaching the day he would become the world's strongest. During that time he had returned to his home village just once. But the entire area had been burnt to the ground.

Nothing was left. Neither the place where he and his friend spent their time, nor the house where he'd lived with his sister. The only fact the burnt down village conveyed to him was that the things he had lost would never return.

Adlet believed he did not become strong for revenge, nor did he fight because of hatred. No, he became strong so that he wouldn't lose anyone again.

But even though he thought that, the person he wanted to protect was indifferent.



Chapter 4: Part One

In the seventh's mind, killing Adlet with their own hands wasn't the best course of action. In fact, they wanted to leave the task to one of the Heroes of The Six Flowers.

If things went smoothly then the seventh could place all the fault and blame onto the person that killed Adlet. And even if they couldn't do that, a large fissure would form in the mutual trust shared among the Flowers. Using that fissure, they could tactfully go around, causing further internal discord among the companions.

The seventh didn't know what was going to occur in the future. But they did understand that flexibility was very important. They needed to be able to view the circumstances well, without just sticking to one way of thinking so that they could accurately use the tools available to them. And more than anything, they could not let themselves be suspected.

If they could do that then victory would tumble into their lap.

Well then, who in the world will kill Adlet for me?

#

When Fremy returned to the temple, Chamo, Nashetania and Hans were already sleeping. Mora and Goldof, on the other hand, were outside keeping watch.

"You've been alive after all? What happened to Adlet?" Mora asked.

"He fled. He was wounded and I had wanted to capture him if possible, but I didn't have my gun."

"I see. It's alright for you to rest as well too. We'll hear about the details tomorrow morning."

When Fremy entered the temple, Goldof called out to her and said, "Sorry I suspected you."

"It doesn't matter. Any ordinary person would have done the same."

When dawn broke Fremy told the five about what happened after Adlet kidnapped her. She then followed that up with her own personal story. Specifically, why she wanted to fight The Majin.

"Those Kyoma were heartless." Mora knitted her brow.

"That was a terrible story, if it's true," Chamo said.

"Chamo! You still suspect Fremy? It's already clear that Fremy is our important ally," Mora chided, to which Chamo giggled.

"Meohehe, I now feel a bit uneasy. Is it alright to think of her as our companion?"

"Hans, even you are saying something?" Mora asked.

"Did you really fight Adlet?" Hans continued, asking Fremy. "The sword I threw successfully went deep into his back right?"

"It missed his vitals. Even you are not as strong as you claim."

"Adlet showed a great deal of affection towards you. When you were suspected he stood up for you. When Chamo said she would torture you he got angry and stopped it. Even the idea that Adlet excites you too is not impossible."

"You're incredibly irritating."

"Meowy, a woman's heart is an eternal mystery. Their words and their inner feelings don't match up."

"Hans, shut-up for a bit," Mora said and Hans stopped talking, a look of mock surprise on his face.

"I too have some questions. Fremy, what did you think about Adlet? How did you feel when you realized that he was the seventh?"

"Ah, I thought that it was true after all."

"After all?"

"He had tried to get on my good side, feigned concern, and tried to gain my trust. But I now understand why."

"Meowy, you're a dreadful woman. And Adlet's a guy whose troubles didn't pay off."

Fremy glared at Hans.

"More importantly, how are we going to catch Adlet?" Goldof asked and Hans walked over to the corner of the temple.

He looked at the iron box placed in the corner and said, "Most of that guy's weapons are here. Without them, he can't fight. I think if we wait here he'll come back to get them meow."

"He's not limited to those. He still has weapons to some extent hidden on him," Fremy objected.

"Not enough to fight all of us."

"While that may be true, I don't think it's good to say he lacks the means," Goldof said. "We should move from here. And since our time is limited, we should probably split up to pursue him."

"Goldof is right," Mora said. "We'll proceed in groups of two. First Fremy. You and I will search for Adlet."

Fremy nodded.

"Princess, make a group with Goldof. Be sure that you don't take it easy on him. Goldof, I'm entrusting the princess to you."

Goldof nodded and Nashetania looked at him with a seemingly uneasy expression.

"Chamo and Hans will remain here to confront Adlet. Stay focused and keep your wits about you."

"Meow? My motivation is cut in half if I'm not with a pretty girl. Can I switch with Goldof?"

Everyone ignored Hans' complaint.

"If there are no objections, let's hurry up and go."

"No way," Chamo interjected. "Chamo hates waiting."

"I see. Well then, Fremy you stay here and Chamo, you come with me."

"Chamo doesn't want to walk around all over the place either. Chamo will play around the area until the barrier comes down."

"...Do you want me to scold you, Chamo?" It looked like Mora was about to pop a vein in her forehead.

Hans laughed. "It's alright. I will be enough for a guy like him."

"...You're all somewhat reliable companions. Well then good, be careful not to get lost. And don't go out too far."

Nashetania and Goldof departed for the west. But when Mora and Fremy were about to leave in the opposite direction, Hans called out to Fremy.

"Hey, Fremy."

"What?"

"Are you really able to fight the Kyoma?"

"What do you mean?"

"If in front of your dear, important mother, she says things like 'I'm sorry, forgive me, I've been regretting everything all this time, let's live together again' would you be able to kill her?"

"I would be able to kill her because I would know she is lying."

"You're wrong," Hans responded and Fremy glared at him with a face full of anger. "I'm an assassin. I've received many requests. Husbands betrayed by their wives. Children abandoned by their parents. Those people came to me and told me to kill for them. But you see, not once was I ever happy about that kind of work. Well, in the end about half told me to call off the kill at the last hour, meow."

"...What's your point?"

"...Well, I guess it doesn't matter."

"Let's go Fremy!" Mora said and the two turned their backs from Hans and walked into the forest.

#

After leaving the temple and walking for a while, Nashetania suddenly stopped. She then turned around and looked behind her, surveying the area over and over again.

"What's the matter?" Goldof, who had been following her, was perplexed by her demeanor.

"Goldof. This question may seem sudden and strange, but do you trust me?" Nashetania looked straight into Goldof's eyes as she spoke.

"Of course. Who other than you princess would I trust?"

But his reply only made Nashetania's expression darken. "You're not understanding what I mean. What I want to ask is will you agree with me without saying a word?"

"Princess, what are you thinking?"

Nashetania continued to look into Goldof's eyes and said, "Adlet-san is not the seventh. From here on out I will act to prove that fact."

"Princess!" Goldof shouted.

"Just this one time it's okay," she said, referring to his outburst. "Now agree without saying another word. I know that Adlet-san fell into a trap and is waiting for my help!"

"I can't consent to that. Even if it's the words of the princess, I cannot do what you're asking of me."

"I'm not saying I don't have the foggiest idea on the matter," Nashetania said, standing her ground. "There is someone I'm nervous about. I still don't have proof, and I may just be mistaken. But, perhaps there are clues that will lead us to the truth."

"Who do you suspect?"

In a quiet voice Nashetania answered, "Hans-san."

#

Meanwhile, Adlet had been moving, running silently atop tree branches so that he wouldn't leave any footprints. Occasionally he would stop, confirm that no one was getting near him and then carry on.

He was heading towards the temple with the hopes that if he could find proof of the eighth then the suspicions towards him would dissolve for the moment.

It was a much more effective course of action than blindly running through the forest in search of the eighth.

He wondered how the six were moving about as he jumped from treetop to treetop. *Perhaps the six are searching for me in groups of two or three. That was a rational decision, if they are being cautious about surprise attacks.*

If they were moving in groups of two it would be fairly bad. Any single person could be together with the seventh and after killing their unsuspecting companion they would lay the blame on Adlet. That may have been the seventh's next plan.

I have to hurry before they can carry out their plan.

He wondered if an investigation of the temple was possible. At a minimum there should be two people guarding the temple. But if they were Nashetania or Fremy then he could use them. With Fremy or Nashetania's cooperation he could get them to leave the temple unoccupied for him. Or he could try directly negotiating with one of them to enter the temple.

They were awful plans, and since he was at the end of the road, he was leaving everything to chance. But at the moment they were the only options he had.

"...Lets do this."

Eventually he reached the temple without running into any of his pursuers. *It seems like luck hasn't abandoned me.* He then climbed another tree, took out his telescope and searched the area. There were no people around the temple.

Perhaps they're waiting to ambush me in the temple. Adlet thought as he circled behind the temple and approached cautiously. He then jumped onto the roof. Afterwards, he placed his ear to the stone roof and listened for sounds inside.

But he couldn't hear anything coming from within the temple. *Could it be that there was no one inside or was it all a trap to lure me in? If it were a trap, did one of his companions set it or was it the seventh?*

Suddenly he sensed a murderous intent and his body reacted before he could even think about it.

"Memeow!"

When Adlet rolled to the side to dodge the attack, a sword stuck into the roof at the exact same moment. His attacker had approached Adlet from behind without making even the slightest sound.

"Yo, I thought you'd come, Adlet."

"So it's you, Hans."

He'd forgotten the fact that the guy was an assassin. Surprise attacks and traps were his specialties. He'd anticipated Adlet's arrival and probably hid himself in the forest in advance.

Hans pulled his sword out of the roof. Then holding a nata in each hand, he twirled the weapons using only his wrists. Though it seemed like he was playing around, he was definitely on guard. It was a strange movement.

"I previously thought your cowardly skills were your only weapons. But you're more capable than I thought."

Hans seemed surprised that his surprise attack had missed.

"So we've run into one another huh. This is a problem. I guess it looks like we'll have no choice but to kill one another." Adlet drew his sword and faced Hans. But that was a feint. Since there was no room for negotiations he was already thinking of nothing but a method of escape.

"It's better if you have the desire to kill me. If you don't then this will be settled in an instant." Smiling from ear to ear, Hans twirled his swords, as if he couldn't contain his excitement about fighting.

"Come from over there. Let a less skilled warrior battle against a superior opponent.¹"

¹ The phrase "let a less skilled warrior battle against a superior opponent" comes directly from Sumo where the better and more experienced wrestlers would take attacks from their juniors in order to give them practice.

"Mehi. Mehihi, umeomeomeow!" Emitting a strange cry, Hans swooped down upon Adlet.

Just as planned.

Adlet's plan was to block the first attack and in that opening throw a smoke pellet in Hans' face.

But right before slashing at Adlet, Hans used both his hands and feet to stop himself. And in the opening created by Adlet being caught off guard, he did a spinning kick and sent the smoke bomb in Adlet's left hand flying.

"Meow. The same moves won't work again and again."

Using the momentum from his spinning kick, Hans swung his sword at Adlet, who jumped back from the roof just barely dodging the blade. Then Hans twisted his body and leaped into the air after him.

The two fell from the roof of the temple, and when Adlet landed on the ground, he looked up to see Hans falling towards him headfirst. But the moment Adlet thought it was the perfect time to escape, Hans, with his hands still gripping his sword, landed on his fists. Then with just the power in his arms, he launched his body towards Adlet.

Revolving through the air, he struck. It took all of Adlet's might to block the blow with the flat of his blade. As he'd put his entire body weight into the blow, the attack destroyed Adlet's balance.

Hans again landed on his hands and then of all things ran towards Adlet on them. He then did a forward roll with both of his swords aimed for Adlet's head.

"Guah."

Though Hans' frame wasn't very large, his attacks were terribly strong. Just stopping them made Adlet's shoulders scream.

Hans' rapid succession of attacks continued. And as if gravity didn't exist, Hans walked on his hands, somersaulted, cartwheeled over and over again, and moved freely on his hands and feet as he attacked Adlet.

Are these the movements of a human? Attacks were flying his way from unexpected directions. Though it didn't seem like he was doing anything but playing around, not even a single strike was useless. Hans coiled about Adlet without moving apart like a cat playing with a ball.

Adlet released poison darts built into his sleeves and then tried to hit Hans with the nail hidden in his foot, but they all missed him. No, they couldn't hit him.

Adlet's weapons were things that were used when the enemy didn't expect them. But at that moment it was him who was experiencing the unexpected.

"Umeow!"

One of Adlet's kicks thrown out in desperation landed in Hans' gut and he let go of his swords. That opening was the moment Adlet tried to drop a smoke pellet.

"Umeomeow!"

Hans caught his airborne swords with his feet, then with the power of both his arms he torqued his body into the shape of a drill and launched himself towards Adlet. As it was an attack with his legs, Adlet was able to stop the attack with his sword, but in that instant Hans' hands grabbed Adlet's feet and pulled him to the ground.

"Shiit..." Adlet gasped as he landed face down. But he had no time to scream. Instantaneously Hans was standing and had his sword pressed to Adlet's neck.

It had been magnificent and in reality, a quick conclusion. Adlet had been completely defeated. Dumbfounded, Adlet stared at the blade pressed to his neck,

Hans' sword was completely preventing Adlet from moving. If he moved even slightly, his neck would be severed.

"Meow. That's unfortunate Adlet," Hans said with a smile. "It wasn't a bad plan. I wouldn't have been able to easily come up with the idea of becoming an impostor Hero of the Six Flowers. And if I weren't here maybe you would have been able to deceive everyone a bit more successfully."

"Hans, I'm..."

"Not the impostor... is that what you intend to say meow? That won't work." Hans had a wide grin.

"I was shocked when you took a hostage. You're quicker on your feet than I had thought."

So his actions then had been a blunder after all. Though Adlet regretted it, he had no time at the moment to be sorry for the things that have passed. Now he had to get himself out of his current situation.

"So then, spit it out for me. Who has been giving you orders? What kind of reason could there be for you to betray humanity and ally with The Majin? If you speak truthfully I won't do anything bad to you."

"...I can't say since I'm not the impostor."

"Don't hold back. I, meow, understand. Do you have any sob stories to explain yourself? You need medicine for your sick mother? Your pretty lover was taken hostage?"

"I have no family. Nor do I have a lover. I've said it over and over, but I'm not the impostor."

"...Meow, well there is no one to feel sad about you dying."

As Hans' sword ripped the flesh of Adlet's neck, Adlet moved. He hadn't exhausted all of his secret weapons. There was a single cord extending down Adlet's sleeve, which he pinched and pulled. And in the next instant a pouch at his waist ruptured with a violent sound and spread yellow smoke across the area.

"Gumeow!" Hans screamed as he covered his eyes. What was ruptured wasn't just a smoke bomb; it was a bomb full of tear gas that equally stopped both Kyoma and humans in their tracks.

"Fuck. I can't believe you made me use this shithead. This extremely hurts!"

The impact was a lot worse for Adlet who had taken the blast at point-blank range. Nevertheless, Adlet was able to escape Hans' hold. He then turned his back on Hans and tried to run. But with the pain in his eyes he couldn't run straight and crashed violently headfirst into one of the salt pillars.

"Meomeomeow! What a persistent brat you are."

"I'm going to be persistent until I get away."

While both of them rubbed their eyes, Hans and Adlet continued to fight. Adlet had used his trump card and only had a few secret weapons remaining on hand.

Adlet believed that he couldn't beat Hans. At the very least he probably wouldn't even be able to escape from in front of him unless his great plan caught him off guard.

Despite having almost no field of vision, Hans' attacks were more ferocious than ever. From his feet and from above his head, Hans swung his sword at Adlet in all kinds of directions, coiling about him like he was dancing.

"...Gifted," Adlet muttered.

There was no mistaking it, Hans was a prodigy. In the whole world only one out of 100,000, or one out of 1,000,000 or maybe only him possessed the kind of skill he was demonstrating. Without it, Hans wouldn't be able to wield a sword technique like that.

Adlet was different. He was an ordinary person. A completely ordinary person.

But Adlet wondered who it was that decided that an ordinary person couldn't become the world's strongest.

"You can't escape meow!"

While doing a forward somersault in the air Hans attacked. No matter what kind of attack was wielded against him, Adlet couldn't predict them. Putting up a defense with his sword and scabbard, Adlet blocked the overhead attack.

Then, when Hans touched the ground he did a cartwheel, and with both of the blades in his hands and both of his feet he attacked with a double slash and double kick. Adlet blocked the blades and created an opening, which Hans used to thrust two kicks into his stomach.

"Ha! It's completely ineffective!" Adlet shouted while feeling like vomiting.

The man who had taught Adlet hadn't pulled any punches. Adlet had become strong in hell. He'd strengthened his body, wielded a sword, and thoroughly studied how to use his secret weapons. However through all of that hard work, he finally came to realize that there was an insurmountable wall laid out between the gifted and ordinary people.

"Over here!" The moment Hans leaped Adlet threw his final smoke pellet to the ground. And with his body face down to the ground he passed under Hans' jumping body.

Thanks to all his hard work he was somehow able to block Hans' attacks. But he couldn't get beyond that point. Surpassing the gifted was something a normal person couldn't do.

However, even if he lost in actual strength he could still win. Even if he wasn't gifted he could still beat someone as talented as Hans. Adlet had come all the way to where he was now believing that.

"...Haa...Haa..."

The two fought for a long time. Most of the tools on Adlet's belts were exhausted. Hans was mostly unscathed, but on the other hand Adlet's entire body was covered in injuries.

But even Hans felt slightly fatigued. For just a slight moment he paused his attack. That was the moment Adlet had been waiting for.

Adlet took off one of his belts that held his various secret weapons and threw it. Confused by the action, Hans stopped and in that time Adlet rapidly removed his second, third, and fourth belts and threw them too. All the belts fell directly in the center between them.

For the first time Hans looked apprehensive since Adlet tossing away his secret weapons now gave Hans the advantage. But Hans was not such a simple man to think that was actually the case.

"Meow, what are you doing?"

".....I don't have my secret weapons anymore. I'll beat you with my strength alone."

"...You're playing some kind of trick."

"That's right," Adlet readily admitted. There was an overwhelming difference in their sword abilities. And there was a stronger possibility that Hans actually thought there wasn't a trap.

“....meow,” Hans said in a groan. He was at a loss as to how to continue.

It was strange. Up until a moment ago Hans had complete superiority in the fight. And since Adlet had thrown away his secret weapons, Hans was in an even more advantageous position. Nevertheless, Hans couldn't move.

If Adlet were to tell the truth, he would say that he had no way of stopping Hans if Hans decided to stop thinking and attack. But Adlet believed Hans wouldn't attack. Hans had a sharp mind. And because it was so sharp he couldn't attack. Even if he thought Adlet may be pretending to have set a trap, he still wouldn't attack.

“What's the matter Hans? Scared?”

“Yeah I'm scared. There's no point in deceiving you.”

“You're honest.”

“I kill people, but I don't lie. I can't lie.”

Given the situation, there would be no success in defeating Hans. Success for Adlet would be clearing up his false charge and finding out who the seventh was. So what he was trying to do now was his plan to achieve that goal.

“Meow,” Hans was observing Adlet carefully. He was checking whether there was something concealed in Adlet's clothes or mouth. Or whether or not there was something that had fallen nearby which could be used as a weapon.

But Hans wasn't paying attention to the sole weapon Adlet was holding, his sword. And using that chance, Adlet struck.

Adlet gripped the hilt of his sword tightly and twisted it. And with the sound of a heavy spring, the blade of Adlet's sword flew, shooting out in a straight line and knocking off the scabbard at Hans' waist.

“Meow!” Hans jumped back and immediately after Adlet shouted to him.

“Hans! Someone like you can understand what just happened right? I purposefully missed with that attack.” As Adlet shouted, he threw his remaining scabbard far away into the distance. He was now completely unarmed.

“...Why did you miss?”

“A guy like you should understand that too.”

After throwing away the hilt of his sword, Adlet proceeded to remove his armor and his clothes, showing Hans that he was truly weaponless.

“Think Hans. If I were the seventh then what reason would I have to miss with that attack? That last attack was the only chance I had to be able to kill you. What reason would there be for letting that chance slip before one’s eyes?”

“...Meow.”

Adlet was using the desperate situation in order to win Hans over as his ally. He believed a man like Hans should be able to understand that Adlet wasn’t the seventh.

At least, Adlet prayed Hans understood.

“No matter how much you try to trick me, it won’t work.”

“If I were the seventh then it would be more beneficial to kill you than deceive you. There are no limits to how low the possibility of being able to deceive you is, but the chance I could kill you was almost certain.”

“...Guu.”

“I am genuine. And it’s because of that that I must not kill a companion. That is my answer, the reason that my attack before missed. Understand Hans!”

Gripping his swords tightly, Hans looked troubled. Adlet's argument should have made sense so he believed that he was able to persuade Hans.

But there was only one giant hole in his plan. If Hans were the seventh then Adlet had now become completely unarmed right in front of the enemy's eyes.

The current situation was a gamble. But Adlet had no choice but to bet on Hans not being the seventh.

Adlet prayed. *I beg you Hans. Understand and agree that I am a genuine member of the Six Flowers.*

Eventually, the power all of a sudden left Hans' body. "Meow. I'm convinced. You are a genuine Flower."

He had been able to persuade him.

Cold sweat was pouring out of Adlet's body. The odds on his wager had been extremely disadvantageous, but he had still won in the end.

However, Hans' next words caused his back to stiffen.

"It's a good thing I remained here. If it had been another of the companions they would have been convinced."

"...Huh?"

“It’s a shame. Really regrettable.”

Hans smiled and Adlet rushed to reach for the belts he’d dropped.

“It’s unfortunate, but I’m the seventh,” Hans said, moving towards Adlet at the same time.

And the moment Adlet grabbed a belt, Hans' sword slashed across his neck.

A burning shock rushed through his body, and Adlet could definitely sense his head being separated from his body.

But...

Still gripping his belt, Adlet was alive. He then touched his own neck and confirmed that it was indeed still attached. There wasn’t even a single thin slash.

Standing to the side and smiling, Hans said, “Humans lie with their words. Their actions also deceive. And neither their eyes, voices, nor emotions can be trusted. But, the face of a person in death cannot lie. Directly before death their face will reveal whatever their true intentions were.”

Adlet almost didn’t hear Hans’ voice.

“If you were the impostor then you would make a face implying that I being the seventh was ridiculous. But you made a face that seemed to imply that it’s all over. Apparently you do not seem to be the impostor.”

“I thought....my neck....was cut.” Adlet barely forced those words out his mouth.

“Is that right? That’s only because you hallucinated that you were cut in that way.” Hans laughed. He then gathered up Adlet’s armor and clothes and threw them to Adlet. “How long are you going to be spaced out like that? Hurry up and get dressed. I have no interest in seeing a man naked.”

Getting back his senses, Adlet stood up, put his clothes back on and fastened his belts. He then picked up the pieces of his sword and reinserted the blade into the hilt.

“From now on, let’s work well together.” Hans extended his hand to the now fully equipped Adlet and Adlet accepted his handshake.

“Honestly speaking, I’ve been thinking it was a bit strange that you were the seventh. If you were the seventh then you would have had no reason to stand up for Fremy.”

“If you had thought that then you should have said so.”

“Meowehee, sorry about that.”

It was only a single step forward. But it was a giant step. The man, who had been the one suspecting Adlet the most, had now become his companion and someone he could rely on.

I'm finally starting to see some hope.

Part Two

Fremy and Mora were in the same place Adlet had spent the night.

"There are a number of marks and prints, but as far as which direction he ran off to I have no idea," said Mora who had been staring at the ground. She then stood, as if she'd given up.

"The blood trail and footprints all end abruptly," Fremy added.

"Guys like Adlet have to be seen as the best when it comes to escaping."

Fremy looked over their surroundings. "Maybe he's still around here."

"The chances of that are low. Even though we chose to come and search for him, it doesn't seem likely that he would stay in one place."

"That's what he would want us to believe, but I'd venture to say he may still be in the same place."

Mora crossed her arms and thought for a moment.

"What's the matter?" Fremy asked.

"I don't know. What is it that Adlet wants to do?"

"He's backed up against a wall, which means his only option is to run."

"You're wrong. There must be something that he's planning. He has elaborately worked out some kind of plan. So to me it doesn't seem like the current predicament will be the end for him."

"Whatever the case, it'll all be over once we catch him. Let's go. We have no choice but to search at random."

Fremy turned her back on Mora and started to walk away, but then Mora called her to stop.

"Don't rush. Let's talk for a bit. It'll be better for us to move after we've collected our thoughts."

"...Understood."

"First of all, I have something I'd like to ask you. You don't know anything about this current trap?"

"I don't know anything."

"You've never heard talk of it among the Kyoma?"

"...Are you interrogating me?"

Mora placed a hand on Fremy's shoulder and said, "Wait. Don't take this the wrong way. It's understandable that you'd be wary of us after yesterday, but we no longer suspect you."

"I don't know about that. What about Hans? Or Chamo?"

"Let me rephrase that. I no longer suspect you. I believe you are an important ally."

"Right...," Fremy responded. However, under Mora's stare, eventually she lowered her head slightly. "I'm sorry, but I don't know. The Kyoma are divided into several small groups and they almost never interact with one another."

"I thought the Kyoma were more into banding together and working towards one common cause."

"The inner workings of the Kyoma are complex. Far more than you think."

"I see."

"Was there no information on your side? There are humans allied with The Majin. Did you know absolutely nothing about that?"

"...No. You'd be completely justified in criticizing me as incompetent." Mora sighed. "The information had come, but I simply decided it was a false alarm without attempting to verify it. If I had been more careful then this situation would have been avoided."

Mora placed a hand to her forehead. Her regret seemed to be oozing out of her.

"Don't worry about it. You're not to blame for this."

"What's that? You're not saying something nice are you?" After saying that Mora smiled. She then placed her hand onto Fremy's head. "There is one good thing that Adlet did. He brought you to us. Even if that were just a link in his plan, it was still a good thing."

"Don't treat me like a child."

"From my perspective you are a child."

Fremy turned her neck and shook off Mora's hand.

"Forget about the fact that you were the Six Flower Killer. You were just following orders. It's the same as when a soldier kills someone on the battlefield and they aren't charged with a crime. The princess and Goldof seemed like they were unable to be convinced but they'll come around eventually."

"..."

"Soon even Chamo will open up to you. She is a pain in the neck, but she does have good points. Hans... he might be better to be left alone. Still, while it's true that you are the Six Flower killer and the daughter of a Kyoma you don't need to build up a wall."

Looking away from Mora, Fremy went silent for a moment. "This is not the time for useless talk. Let's pursue Adlet," Fremy said then started to walk away. Mora followed behind.

As they walked Mora said, "I understand that you feel something for Adlet. When you were cornered by us he was the only one who tried to help you."

Fremy didn't respond.

"But you must take into consideration that Adlet is the enemy. Furthermore he is a surprisingly cowardly enemy."

"Relax. I absolutely hate him."

"Such enthusiasm. Then as soon as we find him, kill him. Kill him at any cost, Fremy."

Kill him at any cost, Mora reminded Fremy over and over again. And in response Fremy just repeated her insistence until she got angry.

#

Nashetania and Goldof were near the edge of the barrier, at the edge of the road leading to The Wailing Demon Territory. It was where the Heroes of the Six Flowers should have assembled and apparently where Mora and Hans had been waiting for the remaining flowers until yesterday.

"Did you hear something coming from the temple?" Goldof asked.

"No, nothing," Nashetania replied. "But more importantly, we have to search."

There was a pit hidden in the large thicket to the side of the road, which looked like the place where Mora and Hans had stayed. With a serious expression on her face, Nashetania was busy looking about the pit, but she was the only one enthusiastic about the search. Goldof was just standing around doing nothing and looking troubled.

"It's no use. Hans-san and Mora-san were certainly here, but that's all I know," Nashetania said as she came out of the pit.

"Hans must have gotten some information from the Kyoma here. But there are no tracks that show that Kyoma had neared this place.

Nashetania grabbed her head. "I want to meet up with Mora-san, but I wonder if she'll listen to me. Mora-san believes Adlet-san is the seventh. What can I do to convince her?"

"Princess..."

"I'm angry with myself. Even though Adlet-san may be killed I can't do or think of anything."

"Princess, please stop," Goldof said, as if he could no longer put up with her.

Nashetania glared at Goldof. "So you don't believe me, huh?"

"Adlet is the enemy! No matter what you say, Princess, that will not change!"

"Enough already. If you don't believe me then go ahead and chase after Adlet-san if you want!" Nashetania then put her hand to her mouth. "...I'm sorry, Goldof. I said too much," she said with a pained expression. "I can't believe it. I never thought I would ever yell at you my whole life."

Goldof also looked hurt. But when Nashetania turned her back to him, as if a dam had burst Goldof blurted out, "Princess, why Adlet?"

"Huh?"

"Why, instead of me who has served you since I was young, do you believe Adlet?"

"What do you mean?"

"...Forgive me, but what happened to you Princess? Something changed about you!"

Nashetania was speechless.

"What is Adlet to you?! The outlaw who intruded into the tournament before the goddess, the unknown man from some unknown place and doubtful origins, a guy you only traveled with for about ten days. Why are you so concerned about him?"

Still dumbfounded, Nashetania stared at Goldof. "I could say the same about you. What happened to you?"

"Princess, I..."

"What are you saying Goldof? The fight concerning the fate of the world has already begun and our companions are exposed to danger. I can't be my usual self, right?"

"That, that's..."

"Adlet-san is our companion, our important companion who will combine his strength with our own to oppose The Majin. Is there something else you've been thinking about?"

"..."

"I'm sorry, but what's wrong with you? This is not the time to be dealing with your jealousy."

"...You're right. Though I should be protecting you princess, I haven't been myself."

Goldof cast his eyes to the ground. His body was shaking out of bashfulness.

"Goldof. I've noticed your feelings for a while. But now is not the time. It's really not the time."

"...Right."

"Let's forget this conversation," Nashetania said then sighed quietly.

"Even you can lose your cool. That's because you're 16, still a child. Since you were such a reliable person, I had forgotten."

"..."

"We haven't understood each other as much as we thought."

Nashetania then returned to her search of the area, leaving Goldof standing completely still, in a daze. And the look of the situation made both of them feel as if a massive fissure had formed between their master-servant relationship.

#

"Meow, once more let's completely search within the temple."

Adlet entered the temple along with Hans. Then once again, he confirmed whether there were any secret paths or hidden doors. But they couldn't find anything, not even a single trace.

While searching, Adlet had been a bit cautious about Hans. In fact, he had been wondering if not finding anything would make Hans say that Adlet was the seventh after all.

As for Hans, he was skillfully clinging to the ceiling and checking for any strange areas.

"Hmm, but there's no way there's nothing here, meow."

Yet, Hans' opinion about Adlet didn't seem to have changed. Hans didn't even appear to be acting cautiously towards him. The way he was acting seemed suspicious and it made Adlet wonder again if Hans were actually the seventh, but just letting Adlet go for the moment.

"What are you doing? You're the one in a tough spot. Focus and search," Hans scolded.

"Ah, right sorry." In a hurry, Adlet returned to his task of checking the floor. The fact that there was an impostor was frightening. It meant that even the people he should be able to trust he could no longer trust.

However, for the time being Adlet wasn't in a position where he could suspect Hans. He had no choice but to bet that Hans was genuine.

"Nothing. There are no secret paths."

Hans let go of the ceiling and landed on the floor. And with that they had finished searching both the floor and the walls, with the only thing they had figured out being that there were no secret paths.

"I have absolutely no idea. Since you're not the seventh there should have been someone who entered the temple before you. Nevertheless, there are no paths for them to do so, so what does that mean?"

"It's probably a Saint after all. Someone with the power to create a secret path or pass through walls. It's possible they also have the power to close open doors."

"The Mora woman said such a Saint doesn't exist. So in that case should we suspect Mora?" Hans asked.

Mora had declared that she knew the powers of all the Saints. She also mentioned that it was impossible for a Saint or someone to enter the temple without leaving a trace. However, there was a chance she had been lying.

"That's overly hasty. There may be powers Mora doesn't know about. Hypothetically, even if the eighth were someone Mora knew, it is also possible to think they had been concealing a part of their powers."

"That is possible. However...if so then we're at a standstill, meow."

"Oops, that's right....I forgot."

Adlet opened his iron box that had been placed in the corner of the temple. He had used up all his secret weapons on hand escaping from the five and during his battle with Hans. So to prepare for the next battle he had to replenish his tools.

"You have a lot of stuff. Don't you have any tools you could use? A secret weapon that can see through lies or something?" Hans asked as he peaked into the iron box.

"The only things I've brought with me are tools to fight Kyoma. But for a situation like this I did bring something else."

Adlet then looked at a small bottle stored at the bottom of the iron box. He took it out and just stared at it in thought.

"What's the matter? Do you know who the seventh is?"

"No, that's not it. But..."

Adlet continued to think for a while. Then he uncorked the bottle. The top had been made into a spray, which he then used to coat the altar with the bottle's red liquid.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing really..."

"What is this?" Hans asked, peering at the bottle.

But when Adlet was about to explain they heard a faint sound come from outside.

Hans instantly ran out the temple. At the same time, Adlet promptly put the bottle into one of the small pouches on his belt.

"Who returned?" Adlet asked, then quietly stuck out his head from the broken door and examined the surrounding area. Hans was waving to him, signaling that there was no problem.

"They may return anytime now."

"We should hurry then."

The two shifted their search to the outside of the temple, checking the walls for a trace of a secret path. But they didn't find anything, just like before. They didn't find any unnatural traces, footprints, or anything else out of the ordinary.

"But what will we do, meow? It'll be a bit bad when the others return."

"Let's give up here then and search for the eighth."

"At random? We haven't even found a single clue."

Adlet leaned against one of the salt pillars, closed his eyes and thought.

Far from a clue, they hadn't even found proof that the eighth existed. However, that didn't mean they didn't exist since there had been someone who activated the barrier right before Adlet entered the temple.

When the barrier was activated, Fremy, Nashetania, and Goldof were all in the same place. Hans and Mora were also together. There was only one person who had been all by themselves.

"...Chamo?" Adlet asked. She had unexpectedly showed up alone at the temple. And there wasn't anyone who could prove what she had been doing before that.

However, even if she didn't have an alibi, it didn't change the fact that her entering the temple was impossible. Without finding which path or method was used to infiltrate the temple, they couldn't resolve anything.

"By the way, since we were in a hurry before, there was something I forgot to ask you."

"What is it?"

"How is the barrier activated? I didn't stop by the fortress so I really don't know."

"You didn't hear from Mora? The barrier..." Adlet stopped what he was saying as a light flickered within his head. Hans had said something important.

"...What's wrong?"

Adlet recalled as best as he could all the events that had happened from when he entered the temple to now. He went over everything that was said between the group, right down to each word and phrase. He was convinced his insight was not off point.

"It's Chamo."

"The seventh?"

"No. I have something to ask her. Where is she now?"

"Chamo should be playing around here. I'm scared to call her."

"It'll probably be bad if I'm here. You go. Ask her one thing for me."

"What's that..."

As he was about to tell Hans the question, Adlet saw a giant worm in front of him. It was moving across the ground at an unbelievably high speed and heading towards the forest.

After a while a voice sounded from the direction the worm disappeared into.

"Chamo's here." Chamo said, approaching and waving her foxtail grass in her right hand. "Cat-san. So you think Adlet isn't the impostor huh? Why are you speaking so recklessly?"

Hans rushed in front of Adlet.

"Meow, don't attack, Chamo. I know he's not the enemy."

"That's a strange idea. Why?"

"About that..."

"If it's going to be a long explanation, you don't have to tell Chamo," she said, interrupting Hans. "Chamo really couldn't care less."

Hans was at a loss as to how to reply and Adlet also didn't know what Chamo was thinking. He wondered if she even planned to find out who the seventh was.

"Chamo is tired of being here. Being alone is boring and Chamo has nothing to play with. Chamo wants to quickly go and defeat The Majin."

"I see. I feel the same. So I have something I want to ask. In order to find who the seventh is, it is very important."

Adlet's request only made Chamo pout, as if she were bored by the concept.

"I've already had enough of these kinds of conversations, discussing who the impostor is and who is genuine."

Chamo raised the foxtail grass in her hands. Then she made a thin smile. The moment she smiled, goosebumps appeared on Adlet's skin.

"First, I will kill you Adlet. And if you're not the impostor, then Fremy. And if it's also not her then Cat-san. If not him, then I'll get rid of princess-sama and the Giant. But since there's no way Mora-obachan could be the seventh, she is the only one Chamo has no desire to kill."

"Wait Chamo, what are you saying?" Adlet called out, while unconsciously drawing his sword. Hans also, like a cat, crouched down and readied himself to strike.

"If you kill everyone, then who will be the enemy? Do you think you'll be enough for The Majin all by yourself?"

Chamo moved the foxtail grass, stuck it in her mouth and pushed it into the back of her throat. She then loudly began to retch and soon after started to vomit. A mix of black, brown, and dirty yellow-colored vomit spewed out all over the ground. It was an abnormal amount, ten times the size of her small body.

"Meo, meomeow!" Hans said in fear.

The vomit Chamo spewed out was taking form. From giant snakes and leeches to frogs and lizards; the vomit was changing into the shape of water-dwelling Kyoma.

"Allow Chamo to explain. There is a swamp within Chamo's stomach. And within that swamp are all the creatures Chamo has eaten up to now, all living in harmony." Chamo then wiped the drool from her mouth with her sleeve. And right after, the Kyoma all at once attacked Adlet and Hans.

"We should run!"

"Definitely!"

Without a moment of hesitation, the two turned their backs from Chamo. But within the forest an even larger number of Kyoma were ambushing them. The two of them turned around and rushed towards the salt pillars. But the Kyoma that Chamo had vomited out were ignoring the barrier and coming at them anyway.

50 Kyoma were approaching them. And Chamo's Kyoma had completely surrounded the temple grounds.

"We have no choice," Adlet shouted.

There was no longer anything they could do but fight. Adlet took out smoke bombs from his pouches and threw them at an approaching snake Kyoma. At the same time Hans twirled through the air and cut off the neck of a lizard Kyoma coming to attack him. But the next moment the Kyoma came back to life, as if nothing had happened. The two heroes then teamed up to finish off a water spider Kyoma that was leaping through the air towards them. But its eight ripped-off legs instantly grew back.

"What is this? What should we do against things like these?" Hans groaned. And Adlet finally understood why Fremy was so frightened of Chamo.

The Kyoma Chamo threw up formed a line and encircled the two warriors, making it so that there was no way to escape.

"Stop screwing around Chamo! Why are you even attacking Hans!?"

"Is it really not okay? There's no proof Cat-San isn't the impostor."

"Are you an idiot!? What are you thinking?"

Adlet was enraged, but Chamo's face looked like she didn't understand what he was even mad about.

"Chamo thought of a good idea. Cat-san, kill Adlet. And then if the barrier deactivates Chamo won't kill you."

Adlet looked over to Hans.

With a pained smile, Hans said, "Don't worry. I have no intention of doing that." Hans then pointed his sword at Chamo.

"Hans. When you have no other choice, even if it's just you, run," Adlet suggested.

"Stop joking around acting all high and mighty," Hans retorted.

And with that, the two launched their attack against Chamo, who just laughed and proceeded to vomit out even more Kyoma.

Part Three

Adlet and Hans fought within the circle of Kyoma, with Chamo standing at the center, her arms folded across her chest.

Even if they tried to deal with the other Kyoma, due to their regeneration it was pointless. So Chamo was their target. However, each time they tried to attack Chamo, a Kyoma got in the way one after another. They would bravely block any attack aimed at Chamo with their bodies, even the weapons Adlet threw at them.

"We can't get her! Split up! We have to coordinate our attack!"

"Meow! Got it! Think of a plan!"

The two separated and tried to pincer Chamo from the left and right. Adlet drew the Kyoma towards him and Hans circled around behind. But both tactics were useless. Each Kyoma was moving autonomously, so even if they tried to hit her with an unexpected attack it would be useless.

"Hehe. Everyone does the same thing. Work together to attack Chamo? No one has been able to achieve that." It didn't seem like Chamo was in the middle of a fight by the way she was acting all calm and composed.

"Anything yet, Adlet?" Hans shouted.

Adlet couldn't answer. Then a leech Kyoma behind him spewed acid his way. Adlet dodged to the side, but another Kyoma started his way. Adlet stabbed his sword into its stomach and threw the Kyoma's body behind him.

He was tired and still hadn't recovered from the fatigue of his battle with Hans. Hans was probably feeling the same. This meant that the longer the fight dragged on, the more unfavorable it would be for them.

"Hans! Cover me!" Adlet shouted.

Cutting off the tongue of a frog Kyoma, Hans replied, "My hands are full. Don't be lazy!"

"I'll think of something while you're protecting me!"

Hans then made a giant leap and landed beside Adlet. And just as Adlet had requested, Hans intercepted the attacking Kyoma coming his way. Without thinking of the consequences, his movements were reckless. But he couldn't hold them for much longer.

Lowering his voice, Adlet asked, "How long can you hold them?"

"60 seconds," Hans replied.

"After 60 seconds, don't think about it, just attack Chamo. I'll cover you." Adlet said, and then he redirected his focus onto Chamo.

First he had to search for an effective weapon. Adlet then threw various kinds of poison darts and observed their effects. The sleep darts and paralysis darts didn't work, but the pain darts were effective.

Next Adlet took out the flammable alcohol from one of his pouches and put it in his mouth. He then sparked the flint in his mouth and sprayed fire at the Kyoma.

"Woah, I'm surprised. Spitting out fire is not something humans can do," Chamo said in a carefree tone. *You're the only one I wish wouldn't talk to me*, Adlet thought.

Then Adlet took out another of his secret weapon from his pouches. It was the tool he had used alongside Nashetania when they were protecting the villagers, the flute that drew the attention of the Kyoma.

Fire, poison darts, and the flute. *Only two of them will work on Chamo. This isn't possible. I need another plan.*

But Hans was nearing his limit, so whatever happened from that point on Adlet would just have to leave to chance.

"Hans, go!"

At the same time as he called to him, Adlet blew on the flute. All the Kyoma reacted with a start and turned their faces towards Adlet. And in that opening Hans closed a considerable distance.

Adlet then blew fire at the Kyoma coming for him, causing them to recoil away.

However, the flute was only able to divert their attention for a moment. Soon, the Kyoma converged on Hans from both sides, but Hans didn't show any attempt to evade; he trusted Adlet.

And Adlet rewarded Hans' trust. Pulling out the poison darts without the Kyoma noticing, Adlet launched the darts into their bodies causing them to scream as their bodies twisted in extreme pain.

And with nothing blocking the way between him and Chamo, Hans leaped forward.

But that can't be all it takes, Adlet thought. A surprise attack like this wouldn't work against the opponent that frightened Fremy so much.

Chamo grinned.

"Idiot." She then opened her mouth wide.

"Don't dodge!" Adlet shouted to Hans. "Stop the attack!"

After Adlet's shout, a bunch of giant roaches appeared in Chamo's mouth, and then shot out at Hans like cannon shells.

Hans crossed his sword in the air and deflected the roaches' attack, easily flinging their bodies aside.

Meanwhile Adlet was already moving. He ran in a direct line and jumped. Then with both of his legs, he kicked the back of Hans. As the roaches were flung away in front of him, the flying kick from behind forced Hans' body to twirl in the air like a ball.

"Strike, Hans!" Adlet shouted.

Hans was flying directly towards where Chamo was standing. With a face that looked innocent of what was happening, she just stared at Hans as he spun her way.

Hans shouted as he twirled through the air, and once he was in range he smacked the flat edge of his sword against Chamo's head and knocked her to the ground. He then landed like a ball and tumbled along the earth.

When Adlet hit the ground after the kick, he rushed over to where Chamo had collapsed, but finishing her off wasn't necessary. She was already knocked out.

The next moment the Kyoma lost their forms and returned to a mud-like state. And after a few seconds they were sucked back into Chamo's mouth.

"Adlet! Restrain her!" Hans shouted.

Adlet took out a bandage from his pouch and crammed it into the mouth of the fainted Chamo.

"Mmm." Chamo woke up and immediately tried to spit out the bandage.

"Meow, don't let her spit it out!"

Adlet grasped Chamo's arms with one hand and with the other stuffed the bandage deeper into her mouth. Hans stood, rushed over and together they pinned down the struggling girl.

"Stop her from struggling!"

"Tie her up!"

The two threw aside their swords and grappled with Chamo. Adlet took out another bandage and gagged her even more. He then took off one of his belts and tied Chamo's arms behind her back.

Even so, Chamo continued to struggle for a while. But eventually she grew still and quiet.

After the fight was over Adlet was so exhausted that he couldn't speak for a while. Hans seemed to be in the same state. At any rate they were tired. Completely exhausted.

"...My back hurts," Hans murmured.

#

With Chamo laid on the ground on her side, Adlet and Hans stayed collapsed on the ground in exhaustion for a long time.

"Well, what should we do?"

"What should we do, indeed."

The two looked over to Chamo. She was glaring at Adlet and her face looked like a child who was scolded after playing a practical joke and now whining that they wished the other person wouldn't get so angry.

When we're not fighting, she's just a child.

"I don't think Chamo is the seventh," Adlet said.

"Neither do I," Hans added.

The seventh was probably someone extremely cautious and deliberate. Chamo's conduct, on the other hand, was too hasty and irresponsible. Of course he couldn't come to the conclusion that it was her.

"Meow. When the others come back we'll have no choice but to fight them."

"That's right. This seventh is a nuisance of an enemy."

Adlet stood. He couldn't waste time. The companions who were out searching for him would return soon.

"So, what's your question for Chamo? Although it doesn't seem like she can answer you in her condition."

"It's alright. She can just answer with a yes or no." Adlet stood beside Chamo. Then as she stared at him, he said, "Answer me this. You can just shake your head no. Please."

Chamo seemed unsatisfied, but at the same time it looked like she intended to answer.

"Do you know how to activate the Illusion Fog Barrier?"

Chamo stared in puzzlement at the question. It was as if she didn't understand why he was asking about that. She then nodded.

"But did you know how to activate the barrier before I met you at the temple?"

Silently Chamo shook her head from side to side.

#

About fifteen minutes had passed since his fight with Chamo and now Adlet was running through the foggy forest without making a sound. He was heading eastward, and as he looked up to the sky, he judged it was past noon by the fact that the sun was starting to descend.

"...Gug," he grunted as he landed poorly on a branch.

When he had jumped, his back had started to hurt, which both resulted in his poor landing and made a lot of noise. The sword wound he'd received from Hans yesterday was hurting again and he'd run out of analgesic. And most likely his fights with Hans and Chamo had made it worse.

All in all, Adlet was injured, tired, and the pain from his wound only amplified his fatigue.

"You have to last," Adlet said to his body.

His only companion, Hans, wasn't with him. He was staying with Chamo at the temple, keeping an eye on her so that she wouldn't struggle again. But he was also there to protect her from the seventh. Considering Chamo's power, the fact that she was laid down and bound would be an ideal opportunity for the seventh. Adlet was disheartened that he couldn't fight alongside Hans, but it couldn't be helped.

Adlet looked over his surroundings. After confirming that there was no one near him, he took out the firecracker that Fremy had given him the previous night. According to her, it would inform her of his position.

He hesitated for a moment, and then smashed the firecracker against the trunk of the tree. Afterwards, he hid himself up in the tree and waited for Fremy.

And then he hit upon the key to reaching a breakthrough with the seventh's plan.

#

In the north section of the forest, Fremy and Mora were running back towards the temple.

"There's no mistake. What we heard before was Chamo fighting," Fremy said.

"But I can't hear them now," Mora replied. "Did she let Adlet go or did the battle reach a conclusion?"

"It's impossible for Chamo to lose. And besides, Hans was also there."

"But I didn't hear the signal. What's going on?"

The six people pursuing Adlet had all agreed that if they found him or found anything important they would send up a very loud signal, that being Fremy's firecrackers.

Suddenly Fremy stopped and surveyed her surroundings.

"What's the matter?"

"Mora, head towards the temple. I'm going to head in a different direction."

"What for?"

"Perhaps Adlet escaped after his fight with Chamo. If he escaped this way you can ambush him. And if he escaped in a different direction, then I'll find him."

"...That's right. Be careful." There was something hidden in Mora's words as she stared sharply and vigilantly at Fremy.

Then Mora ran off. When Fremy could no longer see her, she continued running in a straight line behind her.

#

Up in a tree, Adlet continued to wait for Fremy to arrive.

He had no proof that she had become his ally. On the contrary, she might bring Mora along and the two of them might kill him. The chance was 50-50, or less than that in his favor.

He could conclude from his relationship with Nashetania that she was someone he could rely on. But Goldof accompanied her. And most likely he wouldn't leave her side, no matter what.

So now he had no choice but to count on Fremy.

While Adlet waited, he recalled the conversations he'd had with Hans during their search in the temple, before their fight with Chamo. When Adlet had suggested to Hans that they call Fremy, it made him frown.

"Meow. I knew something was strange about it. So that girl let you escape on purpose after all."

"You noticed that?"

"I thought it was possible. But Fremy hid that information."

That made Adlet feel a bit uneasy. Maybe there were others that were aware of the secret pact he and Fremy had together.

"I will call Fremy. Maybe she noticed something too."

"You should pass on that. What I mean is you must never for the life of you contact her. That girl is dangerous, meow."

"...Why do you think that?"

"Meow. Since the suspicion surrounding you has been cleared that makes Fremy the person with the highest possibility of being the seventh."

Adlet shook his head.

"Fremy is genuine. I'm confident of that."

"...We're split on this issue, then."

For a while the two of them glared at one another. Neither seemed willing to change their minds.

"For now, I'll consider her authentic. But even if I think Fremy is genuine, I still don't think you should contact her."

"Why? She let me escape."

"She let you escape for now, but I think she plans to kill you in the end."

"Why do you think that?"

Hans' gaze was piercing. His screwing around attitude up till now had vanished and now all Adlet saw was the face of a cruel, heartless assassin.

"Fremy lives in darkness. She doesn't love or trust anyone. She only wonders whether there are enemies around her or if the only people around her are those who become her enemies sooner or later. That is the kind of world she lives in. Meow?"

"..."

"I'm also a human who lives in darkness. But the darkness Freya is in is far darker than mine."

"...Is that what you think?"

"That's right, meow. Things like trust, friendship, and protecting companions: those kinds of things you think about are the sentiments of an entirely different kind of living creature than what she is. You can't possibly think you can understand one another."

Hans' advice was probably not incorrect. And he was sympathizing with Adlet in his own way. But Adlet didn't think he and Freya couldn't form a trusting relationship.

"Adlet. Freya dislikes you. She hates how you have tried so hard to stand up for her."

"..."

"Don't misunderstand. It's not that she fights with you outwardly, but deep down she loves you or anything like that. She thoroughly dislikes you from the bottom of her heart. No, she detests you. At the very least it seemed that way from what she said this morning."

Perhaps that was an act.

"Forget about Fremy. And more than that, forget about the closed room."

And on that note their conversation about Fremy had ended.

#

After defeating Chamo, Adlet said he would meet up with Fremy and left the temple. As he did, Hans repeatedly reminded him to be careful.

As he traveled, Adlet thought about Fremy.

Last night the two had talked about each other's pasts. At the time, though it was just a little, he did feel that he could understand her heart. And those feelings didn't seem like an illusion.

He didn't think she trusted him. But there wasn't a single reason why she would detest him. However, he didn't know what Fremy was thinking. And he couldn't tell what was in her heart.

Whether or not it was right to ignore Hans' advice, the answer would come to Adlet soon.

Towards the fog he spotted Fremy. Her figure was faint and she seemed to be looking for him. For a while he just watched her.

Then he confirmed that there was no sign of anyone else in the vicinity. After readying himself, Adlet finally dropped down in front of Fremy.

"...You survive well." Fremy was the first to speak. She gripped her gun and had her finger on the trigger, but she wasn't pointing the muzzle at Adlet.

"I'm exhausted. I thought I would die many times. When I returned to the temple Hans was there and..."

"Only talk about things useful for deactivating the barrier," Fremy said coldly.

Adlet flinched a bit at her interjection, but then rethought the feeling and figured he shouldn't mind. She had been that way from the start.

"One idea came to me. Do you want to hear my opinion and information?"

"Depends on the content."

"The trap the seventh laid out. We were able to see one part of it."

"...I'm listening."

"In the beginning we guessed wrong. No, it was the seventh that made us make wrong guesses. No one had activated the barrier before I opened the door to the temple. And when I opened the door and went inside, the barrier had still not been activated."

"I think that's a bit absurd."

"Keep listening. We knew how to activate the barrier. Stand the sword up in the pedestal; and after saying the command over the slab, the barrier would activate. And who explained that to us? It was Private First Class Rowen at the fortress."

Looking away from Fremy's face, Adlet continued. "But what do you think about the idea of Rowen being an accomplice to the seventh?"

"Both you and I didn't know the barrier existed until we heard about it from Rowen. Nashetania and Goldof too; they said yesterday was the first time they'd heard of the barrier. Mora did know about the barrier, but she said she didn't know how to activate it. Hans heard about it from Mora. And I confirmed earlier with Chamo that she was only aware of the barrier activation process after she'd heard it from me yesterday.

In other words, we wouldn't know even if Rowen had lied."

"...Continue."

"This is the strategy the seventh formulated. First use Rowen to tell us a lie about how to activate the barrier. Then use the Kyoma to lure us all to the temple.

Predicting when I would open the temple door, they made fog engulf the entire forest somehow. So we were mistaken in thinking that someone had activated the barrier and fled. In reality, at that time the barrier had still not been activated. There was only fog. The sword was standing up in the pedestal from the beginning."

"..."

"And nonchalantly the seventh approached the altar and activated the barrier. At that time everyone was fumbling with the altar in an attempt to deactivate the barrier. That was when the seventh slipped in and activated the barrier.

"After that they revealed that until I opened the temple door, the temple had been completely sealed. And if they could frame me, then that would complete their trap."

"The person who laid the blame on you was Hans. Are you saying he's the seventh?"

"I don't think so. Perhaps the seventh intended Hans to tell the truth. Hans was very knowledgeable about the Saint's doors. So the seventh entrusted the explanation to Hans."

Adlet then added more information to complement his explanation. He told Fremy about his fight with Hans, how they mutually confirmed that each other wasn't the seventh. And then their fight with Chamo afterwards.

"What's important is that someone waited until the exact moment when I entered the temple and caused the fog to form. If we catch the culprit who caused the fog, my innocence will be proven."

"I see," Fremy said, and then thought for a moment. "I think that is an incredible idea. Well done."

Adlet balled his hand into a fist and hit it into the palm of his hand. However, Fremy soon added, "But you're absolutely wrong."

"...Huh?"

"It's impossible. It's impossible for fog to form despite the barrier not being activated."

"Can't the Saint of Fog do something like that?"

"You are mistaken in your thinking of the Saints. You think that by using the power of the gods anything is possible. But that is incorrect. The power of the Saints is limited."

"But a saint who can produce fog probably exists."

"She exists. One of the people who created this barrier was the Saint of Fog. But it's impossible to think she caused the fog to occur."

"Why?"

"If the Saint of Fog uses her power the fog would initially appear in the area around her. The width of the radius is probably 50 meters. And it would take time for the fog to stretch across the entire forest. With a forest this big, I think it would take at a minimum fifteen minutes. But the fog instantly appeared throughout the entire forest."

"Wait. Didn't the fog cover the entire forest the moment the barrier was activated?"

"That's right. But it was a barrier that took a long time to form. For 10 years she had to accumulate the power of the God of Fog, all so that she would be able to produce that much fog in an instant."

"So she probably couldn't create another barrier besides the Illusion Fog Barrier? Another barrier that produces fog?"

Fremy shook her head and pointed to the ground beneath his feet.

"Try digging," Fremy said.

Adlet then dug a bit into the ground with his sword and found a stake with sacred phrases written on it.

"That is one of the stakes which contains the power of the Illusion Fog Barrier. There are countless stakes like those buried within the entire forest. Ah, I'd forgotten to mention. Only one barrier can form in a place. If someone attempted to form a second one then one of the two would lose their effect."

"...But, but..."

"It's impossible for the fog to be produced without the power of the barrier. And two barriers that produce fog can't exist in this forest. In other words, it's impossible."

"..." No words came to Adlet. The good idea he'd come up with had been quickly overturned.

He too believed that their current predicament was impossible by any other method than the one he had thought of. And so Adlet no longer had any room for a rebuttal.

"Do you have any questions?" Fremy asked cold-heartedly to the spiritually defeated Adlet.

#

"What a fool!" Mora shouted at the temple. She hit the ground with her armored hand, making the ground in the vicinity shake slightly.

"Meo, meow. Don't get so mad."

Hans had explained the past events to Mora and while she listened, Mora flushed a deep red. But when his explanation was over she openly expressed her anger.

"This is usual for Chamo. But Hans! I'd thought you were a fool before, but I had never thought you were this much of a fool!"

"That's a cruel thing to say."

"Why did you let Adlet escape? It was the opportune, no, maybe the only chance we had!"

Looking fed up, Hans retorted, "Well wait Mora. I think his innocence can be proven."

"...What are you saying?"

"He is quite the person. He saw through the seventh's plan."

"I shall hear it. Pray that my string of patience holds until the end."

Hans told Mora about Adlet's theory, and she listened to it quietly. But when it ended she heaved a massive sigh.

"You know nothing about the power of Saints. Causing fog to spring forth is impossible."

"There's more of a possibility of that than the temple's closed room being broken."

"Both are the same. The temple's closed room can't be broken and the fog can't be produced."

Mora explained why the occurrence of fog was impossible. For the fog to occur in an instant a barrier was important. And on top of that, two barriers couldn't exist at the same time."

"Meow, Mora you're inflexible. Even though I heard what you said, it doesn't seem impossible to me."

"Chamo. Can you come up with a way for fog to instantly come forth?"

Standing with her arms held by Hans, Chamo shook her head.

"You're wrong. You would understand if you only thought about it a bit. After the seventh came up with a phenomenal plan they executed it."

"Ah, I see. Think as you like. I will go and search for Adlet."

Mora tried to turn her back from Hans, but Hans threw a knife that stuck into the ground at her feet.

"Wait. I believe it. Adlet is not the seventh."

"...Have I not scolded you enough?" Mora glared at Hans.

"If Adlet were the seventh then why didn't he kill me? Why did he stand up for Fremy? Why didn't he finish Chamo off? There's no way to explain that."

Mora sighed as if to say she were astounded.

"You don't know? I can easily explain why Adlet didn't kill you."

"..."

"For starters, why did that guy show up in front of us? If he just wanted to trap us in here then it wasn't necessary to show up at the temple. It would have been

better if he stealthily activated the barrier then did nothing but run from place to place.

"But rather he bore a fake crest and appeared before us. For what purpose?"

"...Meow, that um..."

"In order to confuse us with thoughts like Adlet may be genuine and there may be someone else who is the seventh. Don't you think he made us think that in order to invite discord among us? His trap is a trap that attacks our minds. Why can't you understand that?!"

Her words caused Hans to be at a loss for words. Chamo grinned with her mouth stuffed.

"Really, his plan is succeeding. You were thoroughly deceived by him. The princess also seems to think that he's not the impostor. That means two within the Six Flowers are already falling for his trick."

"But well, Adlet..."

"Why did he stand up for Fremy? In order to win her over as an ally? Why did he not kill you? In order to deceive you.

He's not the seventh because he didn't kill you? Even if he were the seventh he wouldn't do so. Do you have anything to refute that?!"

"But I saw it."

"The face of a person near death can't deceive? Isn't that all nothing but your opinion?"

Hans was unable to say anything. And so Mora with a voice full of decisiveness, silently said, "You no longer have a choice."

#

Adlet asked Fremy one question after another. He was wondering if there wasn't a way to create fog or if there wasn't a Saint with that ability. He didn't know much about the abilities of a Saint, so to find out he had no choice but to ask Fremy.

But Fremy's responses were short, as she only repeated how his theory was impossible.

"...What do you think about giving up already?" she asked, coldly interrupting his questions. "You're already checkmated. I fear your theories are off the mark and you've also exhausted all options of escape. Even if you were genuine there's no way you will survive."

Adlet was at a loss. *Perhaps it's impossible to get her cooperation after all. I wonder if it'll be useless to even talk with her any more. Maybe it would be better to search for someone who will cooperate with me.*

"It's no use. There's no way I can give up. If I'm killed then the seventh will set their sights on you next. You will be framed and killed just like me."

Fremy averted her eyes, thinking about something. Even she should understand the danger of her position. They had talked for a long time, so it was possible Mora was heading their way. To remain together any further may be dangerous. But the moment he thought of leaving, Fremy spoke.

"This time will you search for Nashetania?" Fremy looked disgusted. Her guess was exactly right. Now that he had been cast away by Fremy, Nashetania was the only person he could depend on.

"You rely on Hans, then me, and then Nashetania. You're quite the World's Strongest, huh?"

"...I'm used to it. Both being made fun of and being laughed at."

"Don't you have any pride?"

"...I do," Adlet said, and then he smiled. He smiled proudly. "The world's strongest isn't cool. He is the most uncool guy in the world. And so I will continue to struggle as long as I can."

"..."

"Don't worry, leave it to me. As long as I'm alive there shouldn't be any suspicion hanging over you. Trust me Fremy!"

After saying that Adlet turned his back on Fremy and advanced deeper into the forest.

"Wait."

Shocked, Adlet turned around.

"Even if you say to believe in you, there's no way I can do that. I still can't understand you."

"..."

"Why are you able to smile? Why aren't you disheartened? Why do you protect me? What are you thinking? I can't understand any of it."

"Fremy."

"I understand that it's dangerous now. But stay here for a little bit more. I want to know more about you." Then in a quiet voice, Fremy added, "Because perhaps I may believe you."

Part Four

Meanwhile Nashetania and Goldof were still at the west edge of the barrier. There were a lot of wrappings for light travel food on the ground, from which Nashetania proceeded to pick up a few. She then checked both sides and tossed them away.

Goldof was also searching the area. He looked at the trees one by one and checked if there were any strange tracks. However, he was upset, and the exposure of his disgraceful behavior seemed to have formed a rift in their relationship. And as a result, the atmosphere between them was heavy.

"Let's give up here already. It's more important for us to search for Adlet-san and protect him," Nashetania said and started to walk away.

They were far from the temple and hadn't heard the sound of Hans and Adlet's fight or their subsequent fight with Chamo.

"Princess, I still haven't asked. Why do you suspect Hans?"

Nashetania looked behind her and stopped.

"...I also thought something was off earlier. But I haven't told you the details."

"Let's take a walk."

Goldof and Nashetania walked side by side. "Just one thing has essentially been on my mind. However, I may have simply misheard. If it were just a misunderstanding then feel free to make fun of me."

"I won't. So with that aside, please tell me your reasoning." Goldof said, urging her to continue.

"I wonder if you still remember. When he first introduced himself, Hans-san said, *"Meow? She's a princess, even though she's a bunny girl?!"*

"Of course I remember."

"But it's strange. Inside the temple, when Hans-san and Mora-san first entered, he called me princess."

"...Are you sure about that?"

"You can't remember? No wonder, he had been talking about extremely trivial things after all."

Goldof craned his neck to the side. It seemed like he couldn't recall after all.

"In the beginning it just felt out of place. I didn't think it was strange until fairly after that. And now, the more I think about it, the more it weighs on my mind."

"...If what you're saying is true?"

"Well at the beginning he had known that I was a princess. But after that he pretended he didn't know. Why?"

As they walked, Goldof thought. "When Hans and Mora-san came to the temple I was by your side the entire time. It is possible they called you princess after looking at us together like that."

"...Right. But there was one more thing: the time Hans-san stood up for Fremy-san when she was being threatened with torture."

"What was strange?"

"There was something. Wasn't there something that was strange?" Nashetania slapped her face with her palm. "Why can't you understand, even though it seems to be so close in front of you? Do you intend to be this useless?" ¹

"...Well at any rate, let's hurry. I will not be confused anymore. I will trust the princess' judgment."

"...Thank you. Now Goldof can you take a look for me? I'm wondering if Adlet-san is still alive."

¹ どうしてわからないの！もう少しで、もう少しで何か浮かびそうなのに！このまま何の役にも立てずにいるつもりなの！

Nashetania opened the chest plate of her armor and showed Goldof the crest near her collar.

"Please put your mind at ease. No one has been killed yet. Adlet and the other companions are still alive."

"Right. We're doing everything we can, Adlet-san. And I won't lose either."

The two then continued moving towards the temple.

#

Perhaps I may believe you.

When Adlet heard those words hope was born in his heart. Hans was already his companion. Nashetania also perhaps believed in him. If Fremy also allied herself with him it would no longer be necessary to run about.

That thought was at the back of his mind to some extent.

But as if crushing that hidden hope, Fremy pointed her gun at Adlet.

"I've had questions for a long time. Why do you stand up for me? Why have you not doubted me even once?"

"Why are you pointing your gun at me?"

"If you appear to be tricking me, I'll pull the trigger."

Adlet was confused by Fremy's behavior. Her questions were unexpected and she seemed to be impatiently seeking answers. Though she'd said she didn't understand Adlet, from his standpoint he couldn't understand her.

Should I try to tell her my true feelings? Could I win her over? Would she believe me? Adlet considered abandoning those selfish hopes.

But then he said, "...It's a problem of my feelings. I don't think you're an enemy. I want to protect you. I don't have any reason I can tell you though."

"Did you not hear me? Don't trick me."

"Fremy."

With the muzzle aimed at him, Adlet searched within his mind. Adlet had certainly continued to stand up for Fremy to an unnatural degree, not only from an outsider's perspective, but to Fremy as well.

Why though? Adlet asked himself and searched for an answer while Fremy stared at him and pointed her gun at his heart.

"Answer."

Adlet quietly began to speak.

"A long time ago I tried to become a tool for battle. I tried to throw away my human heart and I tried to become a being whose only purpose was to kill the Kyoma that had taken everything from me."

Fremy didn't ask him something like, *what kind of story is this?* She just silently listened.

"As you said, and as my master said, I thought because I'm an ordinary person there was no other way I could become the world's strongest. But that was wrong."

"What was?"

"I had thought that I could throw away my heart, but it's not something that can be thrown away. No matter how many times I thought I could discard my heart, my heart continued to remain as it is."

"You're wrong, Adlet," Fremy said in a cold voice. "I was able to throw away my heart. But it wasn't a human heart, just a Kyoma's. In order to get revenge on my mother and The Majin, I threw it away and survived."

"You're wrong Fremy. The heart can't be thrown away. After all, to even consider throwing away your heart is due to your heart's feelings."

Fremy was staring at Adlet, but he couldn't tell what she was thinking.

"Throwing away everything to become stronger is something you'll never be able to do. No matter what, the only thing you'll never be able to stop is growing to care about other people."

"..."

"I care about you Fremy. Though I can't say it's been a long time, it's just been since yesterday. But since then I have cared about you."

With her eye wide open, Fremy just stared at Adlet.

"That's what you have been thinking? When you and I were together you were thinking that?"

"I'm only just noticing my feelings now. However, since the first time I saw you those feelings haven't changed."

"So that's why you protected me?"

"I was worried. When we met up with Nashetania you knew that you were the six flower killer. But when I saw Nashetania and Goldof suspect you I thought that was no good.

If even your companions won't trust you, then I figured I had no choice but to do so. And if there were no one in the world who would protect you, then I thought I had no choice but to protect you."

"And after that?"

"I felt the same even when we understood there was an impostor among us. I thought that more than searching for the 7th or anything else, I had to protect you. Doubting you and thoughts like that never crossed my mind. It's natural to think it is unnatural. But it can't be helped. I've come to care about you."

"What do you like about me?"

"Hell if I know. But when you have sad thoughts in your heart, it's painful for me too. And even though I am the strongest man in the world, I cannot tolerate that pain."

"So...you have to protect me?"

In Fremy's cold expression he could tell there was a faint sign of confusion. Even though sometimes she looked like a doll holding a gun, he was confident that she wasn't a heartless monster.

Even she had a heart. And if she had a heart then he believed he should be able to reach it.

"I'm sorry, but it's impossible for you to protect me. I will die after killing The Majin, anyway."

"Why?!"

"After I kill The Majin, what place would be okay for me to live in? I couldn't return to where the Kyoma are. And there's nowhere I could live in the human world. I'll have no other choice but to die. It would be ideal if The Majin struck me down at the same time as I destroyed it."

"No," Adlet said as he shook his head. "Now revenge may be everything to you, but it's just for now. When your revenge is over then you have to begin your next life."

"That's not an option for me. Humans will never accept me. They could never accept the daughter of a Kyoma and the Six Flower Killer."

"Don't worry. I'll make it happen somehow."

"...What are you saying?"

"The world is vast. I can at least make a place that will take in a person like you."

"Don't say foolish things. There's no way you could do that."

"You're the one saying foolish things. Who do you think I am? I am Adlet, the strongest man in the world. There's no reason I can't make a single place where you can belong."

Even Adlet understood that what he was saying was absurd. In this current situation he was far from defeating The Majin. In fact, his companions were coming to kill him. But the first step was believing he could do it. If he didn't think he could do it then he wouldn't start anything.

"Do you think I'm screwing around? Do you think I'm a fool? I don't think so. I will show you I can do it, without a doubt...and that's what I wanted to tell you. That's everything that I feel."

Fremy averted her eyes and fell silently for a long time.

Meanwhile Hans' words were floating within Adlet's mind, *"Fremy lives in darkness. She doesn't love or trust anyone. She only wonders whether there are enemies around her or if the only people around her are those who become her enemies sooner or later. That is the kind of world she lives in."*

That's wrong, Adlet thought. That wasn't her.

"Things like trust, friendship, and protecting companions: those kinds of things you think about are the sentiments of an entirely different kind of living creature than what she is. You can't possibly think you can understand one another."

Hans, I trust you, but on this one you're wrong. I can understand her.

Time passed and Adlet waited silently and still.

"...I understand you...," Fremy said.

Then Adlet saw it. Within her eye, the eye she was looking away with, there was definitely a desire to kill.

A gun shot rang through the air. Adlet dropped to the ground and just barely dodged the bullet.

"...I'm sure now. You're the enemy," Fremy said. And looking her way, Adlet could see an endless, deep darkness had spread throughout her eye.

#

Mora dashed towards Hans in front of her. Holding Chamo in his arms, he had no way to stop her charge. Mora then took back Chamo and removed the restraints on her hands and mouth.

"Puha!" Chamo exhaled.

Mora then handed over the foxtail grass to the now free Chamo.

"What are you doing? Don't you know how dangerous she is?" Hans shouted.

"Look after him. And don't move from this place. Okay Chamo?"

"Yeah, okay. Leave it to Chamo," Chamo said with a grin.

Mora then firmly gripped her shoulder. "I said watch over him. I didn't say attack him. You'll just be acting selfishly if you attack. If you can do this right, I won't get any angrier."

"...Ah, so you're angry after all." A cold sweat was running down Chamo's forehead.

"If you act selfishly this time, I'll have no choice but to spank you."

"Got it," Chamo said, while pressing her hands to her behind.

"Mora is strong enough to freak you out, Chamo?" Hans was surprised.

Chamo was the one who replied, "Chamo is far stronger, but...Mora-obachan is scary."

Mora heaved a heavy sigh. Then, though she wasn't doing anything, a heavy buzzing sound started to emit from her body.

"God of Mountains. Lend me your power," she muttered, and then Mora opened her mouth very wide and shouted. Her voice was like an explosion.

"PRINCESS! GOLDOF! FREMY!"

It wasn't just a loud voice. The voice created an echo that reverberated several times throughout the entire forest.

"Meow! What is that?"

"That is the power of echoes. Mora-obachan is the Saint of Mountains and so she can do a lot of things."

Hans and Chamo pressed their hands to their ears. Neither could hear the others' voice.

"HANS WAS DECEIVED! HE MANAGED TO ESCAPE DEATH, BUT HE'S IN CRITICAL CONDITION. AT LAST I CAN SAY IT IS ADLET! HE IS THE SEVENTH AFTER ALL!"

Hans looked frightened.

"KILL HIM AS SOON AS POSSIBLE! DON'T HESITATE!" And with that Mora stopped using the power of echoes.

"What are you thinking?!" Enraged, Hans grabbed Mora's neck.

"Now, even the princess will probably prepare herself for what needs to be done. And though I don't know what Fremy is thinking, there's no way she'll let Adlet go. So Adlet has been cornered."

"...You, you can't..." As Hans was speaking, a snake-shaped Kyoma coiled about his arm. Chamo had spit out four Kyoma and they were restraining him.

"Mora-obachan. Do you need me to beat him half to death?"

"Don't say foolish things. Just hold him for now." Mora fixed her lapel then started to run.

"Wait! Wait dammit!"

Hans tried to pursue Mora, however Chamo's restraints didn't buckle.

"Wait! Could it be you're the seventh?!"

Mora did not turn back in response to Hans' shouts. She just continued straight to where Fremy was.

#

Mora's echoes carried across the entire forest.

As Fremy loaded a bullet, she said coldly, "It seems that it was true."

Running around with his body low to the ground, Adlet's face was shaking with anger.

"What the hell are you doing, Mora?!"

He looked at his own hand. The crest wasn't lacking any petals. However, he wondered if Hans was safe. And he was deeply concerned that Hans might actually be on the verge of death.

And more than that, maybe now he had even lost his last companion. Within his heart he prayed, *Nashetania, please realize that it's a lie.*

In her hand Fremy produced an apple-sized clump of gunpowder. She then threw that high up into the sky and made it explode. It was probably to let Mora, Goldof, and Nashetania know her location.

If he stayed there he could be surrounded. But if he headed towards the temple he would run into Mora.

What should I do? How in the world am I going to get out of this?

#

"...Princess, did you hear those words just now?"

Nashetania was standing shocked, and it didn't seem as if Goldof's words had reached her. They then heard the sound of an explosion.

"That was probably Fremy. Perhaps she is telling us Adlet's location. We should head that way."

"..."

Nashetania just stared in the direction of the temple shrouded by the fog.

"I'm sorry, Hans-san. You weren't the enemy after all."

"...Princess."

"What have I been doing here?"

"Well, let's go."

Goldof grabbed Nashetania's hand and pulled her forward. However, she just staggered and didn't try to run. She was just focusing on some point in the empty sky, thinking about something.

"Hold on for a second."

"What's wrong? What are you thinking about?" Though he was in a hurry, he was even more faithful, so Goldof waited for Nashetania.

Then after about a minute passed, Nashetania bellowed, "Haa..." She then started to laugh, shocking Goldof. "Haa, hahaa, ahahaha."

"Princess, please get a hold of yourself. What's wrong?"

For a little bit longer Nashetania continued to laugh. Then her laughter died down and she suddenly spoke in a cold tone.

"I really haven't been thinking straight today. So many things happened, but I didn't know what was what. But I'm calm now. I have finally composed myself Goldof."

"But if you're composed....that's good."

"I understand it now," Nashetania said and looked at Goldof. "This is the first time I've known this feeling. A feeling of serious anger."

"Princess..."

"I'm not saying I've never been angry before, but I was never truly angry. This is the first time I have understood what true anger feels like."

Nashetania smiled and then started to run. It was like she was someone completely different than the person she'd been up till then.

"I finally understand. This was how it was. It was this kind of emotion. This emotion, I wonder how I should express it."

"...Princess..."

"Adlet-san, even though I believed him....even though I believed in him..."

Nashetania was gripping her rapier and trembling with anger.

"This is great, Goldof. Since I started out on my journey there has been nothing but things I've learned for the first time. And from here on out I will continue to encounter things for the first time!"

Without even turning to look in Goldof's direction, Nashetania continued to run straight forward.

"I want to know! If I rely on anger and cut my enemy to shreds, I wonder what kind of emotion I'll feel."

Looking at Nashetania as she ran forward, Goldof couldn't come up with any words to say.

#

Fremy was going after Adlet. Chamo had restrained Hans. And Mora, Nashetania, and Goldof were running towards Adlet. *The time is now*, the seventh had been thinking.

They couldn't say that things were going well. Originally the seventh had expected that it would only be a bit longer before Adlet was easily dealt. But the seventh had been shocked when Adlet took Fremy hostage. And the seventh had never even thought that Adlet would continue to run for an entire day after that.

Adlet was entirely full of surprises. And his self-proclaimed title of world's strongest was beginning to seem that it wasn't a lie.

However, that was a trivial miscalculation on the seventh's part. Adlet's end had been a matter of time from the beginning. Even if he held out for one or two days it didn't change the situation at all.

The seventh wondered what they should do after killing Adlet. Of course, the next person they would deal with was Fremy. That would also be a simple task. Her companions would automatically come to kill her.

Things would get a bit more difficult after that. Whoever seemed to be directed with suspicion would be executed. If opinions seemed to be split it would stir up a confrontation and cause them to kill one another. So without overdoing themselves by carrying out a plan, the seventh figured they should play the situation by ear and respond accordingly.

Though the chance was low, if the seventh had suspicion focused on them their move at that time would be to escape. Having killed two of the Six Flowers would already be a sufficient military achievement.

If Adlet stopped the fight, the seventh wondered what they would do if Adlet tried to resolve things through talking. Just the order of how the seventh would deal with things would change. Taking the lead in the conversation, they would execute Fremy. After that it should be good to deal with Adlet. There would be some difficulty that came along with that plan, but the seventh didn't think it would be much of a problem.

As a renowned war strategist had said, when a battle begins, the end is 90% decided. The seventh reflected on the accuracy of those words.

When Adlet had set foot in the temple the seventh had been able to set into motion their trap of producing fog without anyone noticing. At that moment the outcome had been decided.

However, the seventh did have one concern. It was the faces the Heroes of the Six Flowers would have after killing Adlet and Fremy. Though the seventh had been desperately resisting the urge to snicker up till that point, the seventh wondered if they would be able to resist smiling in front of the others when the remaining heroes realized that neither Adlet nor Fremy had been the impostor.

Part Five

"Fremy! Go back to the temple! When you get there you'll realize that Mora is lying!" Adlet shouted as he ran through the forest. However, Fremy didn't respond. She just continued to chase after Adlet with her rifle poised and ready to fire.

Even so, Fremy was having difficulty attacking him since each time she fired the gun she had to reload it. It seemed like the rifle didn't have the ability to fire consecutive shots.

"So what?" Fremy asked as she went after Adlet. "Maybe Mora is lying. But that doesn't change the fact that you are the impostor."

"Why do you think that? I..." The moment he turned around to shout, Adlet's body bent down and a bullet flew right above his head. The stinging hot air scorched his skin and at that moment he realized that if he took one of those hits it would blow his body apart.

"...I missed."

Fremy loaded another bullet into her rifle. Usually gunpowder and the bullet were entered into the muzzle and had to be stuffed down with a pole. However, Fremy was loading the weapon around where her hand was gripping the rifle. So Adlet didn't have the faintest idea what kind of structure or mechanisms the rifle operated by.

"You still haven't come, Mora! Adlet's here!" Fremy shouted.

Adlet wondered how close Mora was to their location. However, as he didn't know what direction was safe to escape to, he was simply running in a random direction.

Since the beginning, Adlet had been faster than Fremy. And if he were able to put enough distance between himself and her he believed he should be able to escape from her field of vision. But the moment he couldn't see her anymore he heard her shout, "You won't escape."

This time a bomb flew his way. Adlet jumped up to a tree branch as the explosion blew down the surrounding trees. From the other side of the smoke a second and a third bomb flew Adlet's way, tracing a parabola in the sky.

Adlet threw knives at the bombs to strike them down, but the air pressure and the sparks still burned his body.

Their combat abilities were so fundamentally different that he couldn't even escape. It was as if he were a small boat trying to battle a warship equipped with rows of cannons.

He was powerless. Once again Adlet had to digest that fact. What he would call weapons were just tiny swords, sleeping darts, throwing knives and smoke bombs. He also had several simple bombs but they couldn't compare to Fremy's.

Nevertheless, Adlet was the world's strongest. That is what he believed.

Without any concern for possible casualties, bombs were flying all over the area. One bomb, however, slipped through as Adlet failed to intercept it with his knives. So he leapt from the tree branch he was on, curled into a ball in the air, and endured the shock from the explosion.

"I will not allow myself to feel the kind of relief that comes with finally accomplishing one's goals. Not until this eye clearly sees its enemy reduced to a lump of meat."

Adlet knew if he received a follow-up blow from Fremy it would be the end. So before she threw another bomb, Adlet threw a pain inducing dart at her.

"HU!"

Luckily, it hit.

And the moment Fremy stopped moving, he was able to escape. However, Adlet daringly remained where he was. If he ran while out of breath his blood wouldn't circulate in his head. And if he couldn't think he would not be able to survive.

What should I do now? He wondered if he should expose the method used to produce the fog or if he should seek help from Hans. But in the end he believed neither was the right decision.

Fremy was the key. If she didn't believe him he had no chance of succeeding.

So he couldn't run. He would confront the heart of the girl who didn't believe him.

"Why do you think I am the impostor?"

The smoke was clearing up and Fremy appeared in Adlet's field of vision. She soon grabbed the poison dart in her right shoulder and threw it to the ground.

"...Don't open your filthy mouth."

Fremy's words were full of resentment. But he wondered why. He hadn't said anything that would make her angry. However, even though she was upset, at the same time he thought it was a good chance for him to try and understand her. If he could find out why she was angry perhaps he could find a way to change her mind.

"Answer what I asked you Fremy!" Adlet spoke roughly. Trying to soothe her would have the opposite effect.

"I can see your real nature. The true nature of a cowardly trickster."

" Answer me!"

"From what I can see, there is a dirty motive under your words. You line up all these nice sounding words, but you're just trying to trick me."

"I am speaking from my true feelings! You aren't seeing anything!"

Fremy was forming a giant bomb in her hand as she stared at Adlet. She probably intended to blow up the entire area around Adlet and leave no trace behind. But Adlet resisted the desire to run and stayed where he was.

"You're always saying the same lies. I trust you. I will protect you. I've been thinking of you." As she spoke, Adlet could faintly see tears in her eye. "I will not be deceived again. You see, I don't consider someone protecting me to be convenient. I fight alone, live alone, and will die alone."

"...Fremy."

"I know now. In my body, in my skin, I finally realize that it's far better not to trust anyone than to trust someone and be betrayed!" She shouted as she threw the bomb. And as Adlet watched it approach he thought about Fremy's past and when the people she loved had betrayed her.

It wasn't that Fremy didn't trust people. She strongly decided in her heart not to trust people so that she wouldn't be betrayed. But if someone looked at it a different way, they could see that in her heart she wanted to trust someone.

Adlet leaped back and the bomb crashed into the ground beneath his feet. It wasn't a smoke bomb or tear gas pellet, but a bomb made to kill. Still, even though he leaped back, he wasn't able to completely escape in time. There was nothing he could do to prevent his body from being blown back by the shock from the explosion. He'd barely evaded the main explosion of Fremy's bomb, receiving burns all over his body instead of being blasted into pieces.

"Fremy! Did you finish him off!?" A voice called from behind Adlet.

"Mora!" Adlet and Fremy shouted at the same time.

Mora was rushing towards Adlet with violent force.

"Don't use a bomb. Cover me with your gun! I will kill Adlet!"

Fremy threw away the newly formed bomb in her hand and readied her gun. And with an armored fist ready to kill, Mora approached.

Adlet stood, turned his back to Fremy and ran directly towards Mora.

But right before her fist struck, and just as Fremy fired her gun, Adlet ducked down to the ground. He was completely defenseless and had no way to defend against the bullet. However, he continued to live. The bullet was deflected with a high-pitched twang, but Adlet wasn't the one who had stopped the bullet.

It was Mora.

"...Mora. Why did you block it?"

"Calm down. Look closely, Fremy."

Adlet had dropped down to his knees at Mora's feet with his hands extended, palms up. It was a posture of allegiance.

Fremy lowered her gun and Mora looked down as much as she possibly could.

"Have you finally surrendered? Well it's too late. Don't think this will save your life," Fremy said.

"....So you're getting rid of yet another person huh?" Adlet said.

"But before we do that let's have him tell us everything," Mora said. "Tell us your plan Adlet, and tell us who is behind your actions."

Adlet looked up and asked, "Is Hans safe?"

The one thing Adlet had been afraid of was that Mora and Chamo had joined forces and beat Hans half to death. But Mora's expression changed slightly, and from that quiver he confirmed that Hans was safe.

"What are you saying? Weren't you the one who injured him?"

"..If he's safe then it's alright."

Adlet couldn't break his posture because Mora's hand was on his head. And at that distance, if she swung downward she could smash his head into pieces.

"Well then, talk. Why did you ally with The Majin? Tell us the details of how you came to possess a fake crest."

"Unfortunately I have nothing to say about that. I can only say the same thing I've been saying all this time."

"Then die."

The moment Mora raised her fist, Adlet shouted, "After this Fremy's authenticity will be proven!"

With a surprised look, Mora stopped her hand. She then directed her sights to Fremy. But since she was behind Mora he didn't know what expression Fremy had on her face.

"Do you intend to ask what I mean? You can say you don't, but things will become clear if you do."¹

Mora did not respond. Instead, Fremy asked, "What do you mean?"

You're going to ask after all, Adlet thought, then he continued to speak. "I do have one assumption. I am assuming that the person who activated the barrier is one of the seven who appeared with the Six Flower crest. There are no facts that anyone else entered the temple. And since we have no time, I will ignore that option."

"You're the impostor, bastard. Isn't there sufficient proof of that?"

It seemed like there was a clear tremor in Mora's voice, but Adlet willed himself to ignore it.

"I'm not going to take out a weapon. So don't attack, just be quiet and watch," Adlet said, then with his left hand he searched in one of the pouches on his belt. He then pulled out a small iron bottle and set it beside him.

¹聞くつもりはあるか? ないと言っても聞かせるがな

"This is a chemical made by my teacher. It is valuable so use it carefully."

"...You're teacher? Could it be..."

Mora couldn't find the words to continue. Perhaps she knew of Atro, but there was no time at the moment to confirm that fact.

"This chemical was designed to find traces of the Kyoma. It will react to the unique secretions created by the Kyoma's bodies and change color."

"..."

Mora had a dubious expression, however, without turning around Adlet added, "Fremy, hand over one of your bullets. Throw it next to me."

A bullet came tumbling to Adlet's side. Fremy wanted to hear what Adlet had to say. To Adlet that meant that she still, even just slightly, thought he may not be the impostor.

Lying face down, Adlet opened the bottle with both hands and sprayed the bullet with the chemical. The bullet changed to red then after 30 seconds returned to normal.

"Do you think this is a trick? If you do, then go ahead and examine it closely. You will realize that this is definitely a chemical for finding traces of Kyoma."

"What the hell are you thinking?" Mora groaned.

"I sprayed this chemical on the altar that activated the barrier. But the altar didn't change color. Hans also confirmed this. And as you just saw, this chemical also reacted to Fremy."

"...Adlet," Fremy was about to say something, but she stopped.

"Fremy never touched the altar. And that is the proof that she is genuine. That is the proof that she didn't activate the barrier."

And with that he had been able to prove that Fremy wasn't the impostor. No matter what kind of trap the seventh tried to set, Fremy couldn't be falsely accused of being the impostor. And even if she were to be accused, Hans would probably protect her.

There had been a possibility he could escape from Mora. However, Adlet had chosen to protect Fremy instead. Perhaps as a result of that choice Adlet would die, but Adlet put all of his energy into taking care of what needed to be taken care of, so he didn't regret the decision.

"Mora, if you are the seventh then it serves you right. I thwarted your plan to frame Fremy and try to get rid of her."

"Fremy, don't be fooled. Don't think such strange things," Mora said.

"Fremy. After I die, find the seventh. You can trust Hans. Work with him."

"Don't let him trick you Fremy. You understand don't you? This guy has been trying to ensnare you all this time. He has just been flattering you in order to try and gain your trust. This is nothing more than that," Mora tried to persuade Fremy, but Fremy returned no response.

"Adlet!" Mora made a fist and prepared to strike. "You're quite the person. And for a moment even I thought maybe you were genuine."

"Don't kill me, Mora. You would regret it, if you are indeed genuine."

"That's exactly why I have to do this," Mora shouted to Adlet. "It's behavior like that which makes you so frightening. If I don't kill you here everyone will end up believing you!"

Adlet closed his eyes. He couldn't dodge Mora's attack. There was no longer anything he could do.

He heard the sound of air splitting as Mora's first descended. But then another sound split through the air. It was a high pitched metallic sound, reverberating through the air.

"Fool!" Mora shouted.

Adlet opened his eyes and turned around to see white smoke rising up from Fremy's poised rifle.

The bullet had ricocheted off of Mora's iron fist.

"Adlet. I've hated everything about you ever since we first met." Fremy's expression was cold. However, a single tear ran down from her eye.

"I hated the fact that I was starting to trust you."

"Stop Fremy! Don't be fooled!"

"And even now I hate you. In fact, the more we talk, the more I come to hate you. But I do believe what you are saying is true. Even though I vowed never to trust anyone again."

"Fremy!"

Again Mora raised her fist. However, Adlet twisted around and dodged her attack.

"That's enough! I'll get rid of you myself."

Adlet picked up his sword and stood. And Mora, who now had the tables turned against her, once again tried to attack Adlet.

"Run Adlet!" Fremy shouted as she threw a small bomb.

And Adlet ran, thinking that finally he and Fremy were able to understand one another. But even so, victory was still far away. He still had to expose how the fog had been produced.



Chapter Five: Part One

"You won't get away!"

Mora ran, ignoring the small bomb nearing her while Adlet dodged her fist bearing down on him. Her fist then thrust into the ground, creating a hole as if something like a meteorite had crashed to the ground. Even she was an exceptional opponent.

"Hun!" Mora grunted as she grabbed the base of a tree and pulled. Each root of the tree was lifted out of the ground one by one and then once the tree was fully uprooted she used it as a giant club to attack Adlet.

"Watch out!" Fremy shouted as her bullets hit the trunk of the tree.

However, Mora ignored Fremy and focused solely on Adlet. Her attacks were persistent, and each strike had the power to kill him instantly.

Still, Fremy managed to force her way in front of Mora and speak to Adlet. "I will hold her. You run Adlet."

"No way. You have to run too. Mora is dangerous."

The chance that Mora was the seventh wasn't low and so it was dangerous to pit Mora and Fremy against one another.

"You're interfering, Fremy!"

Fremy intercepted Mora's charge and with Mora stopped Adlet thought about a way the two of them could escape. However, at that moment Adlet sensed something dangerous approaching from his side.

"Fremy-san, get out of the way!"

Fremy jumped to one side and Adlet rolled to the other just as countless white blades sprung up from the ground where they had been.

"You're late, Princess," Mora muttered.

Nashetania was standing deep in the forest with her rapier prepared and a smile on her face. *She certainly does smile a lot*, Adlet thought as he looked at her. However, there was something different about her.

"Do you get it, Adlet?" Fremy asked. She was aiming her gun at Mora and her bomb at Nashetania. Indeed he did understand what she was trying to say. Nashetania was no longer his ally.

For some reason Nashetania didn't move after her initial attack. She just stood completely still with a smile that looked like it had been attached to her face.

Adlet then noticed that Goldof was behind Nashetania. He was watching Adlet while also searching for an opportunity to strike.

"It was fun, Adlet-san. The ten days I traveled with you," Nashetania began to speak, as if she had forgotten that they were at a battleground. "It seemed like I knew a lot of things, but I really didn't know anything."

I didn't know the joy of traveling without a coachman¹ or maid. This was the first time I knew the fear of actual combat, and the first time I knew of the reliability and trustworthiness that could be found in the people at my side as they encouraged me."

It had been a long time since Adlet had seen her look so calm. She had been bewildered, frightened, and troubled ever since she'd found out that the seventh existed. Yet now she looked cheery.

"I am grateful. Thank you."

A chill ran down Adlet's spine.

"But now that I'm finished expressing my gratitude, I will kill you."

"...Run. When you get the chance, run with all your energy. Nashetania is out of her mind," Fremy whispered. Adlet agreed. He was just as frightened of Nashetania at that moment as Fremy was.

"Listen Nashetania. Hans is safe and Adlet is not the enemy. Mora is lying," Fremy said.

"No Princess. Adlet is the enemy. Hans is seriously injured. And Fremy is just being deceived," Mora retorted. But there was no composure in her voice.

¹ A bit of an outdated term, it refers to someone who steers a coach or a horse carriage

"Calm down Nashetania. We still don't know who the seventh is. But it's not Adlet."

"Don't fall for it. Adlet is skilled at deception."

Both Fremy and Mora tried several times to persuade Nashetania. But Adlet remained silent and just stared at her.

He did not want to fight. He was injured and exhausted. The wound he'd received from Hans was beginning to ache again. Plus, he was hurting from the burns that came from his fight with Fremy. He had no strength left to fight Nashetania.

"Goldof, you're listening right? Don't make a move yet," Fremy said to Goldof. But the response was in a sense more undesirable.

"Be careful," Nashetania said to Goldof. "I don't know what Fremy-san will do."

She'd ignored her. Nashetania had ignored everything Fremy had said.

Then Mora chuckled and Fremy gave up trying to convince Nashetania. Even Adlet prepared himself yet again for another fight.

However, though Adlet thought the attack would come at any time, Nashetania just smiled and stared at him. Her lack of movement also seemed to confuse Mora.

Fremy turned around and asked, "Adlet, what should we do?"

Adlet couldn't return an answer. If Nashetania met up with Hans and understood that he was safe then her mind would change. But Adlet began to wonder if he really were safe. In addition, he was wondering if Mora were the seventh, if Chamo were the seventh, or if the seventh had another trap ready for them.

"Can't think of anything?"

"Head to the temple. If Hans is safe we'll meet up there."

"And if he's not safe....?"

"We have no time to think about that."

There was another option, which was for Adlet to prove his innocence there and now. If he exposed all of the seventh's plan then the battle would end.

But at the moment no method to cause fog to form was coming to mind.

Think, Adlet told himself. There's just one left. If I can establish proof of the method, or even if I can't, but I'm able to make a convincing claim at least, then we can get through this without having to fight.

"...I'm thinking too. However... I haven't come up with anything," Fremy said regrettably. But Adlet couldn't blame her. He couldn't think of anything either.

"Adlet-san. I'm waiting...," Nashetania suddenly said. Her voice was bright and cheerful, which felt completely out of place.

"Waiting for what?"

"Your confession," she said as she aimed her rapier at Adlet. "I know that if I capture the person who did bad things they will confess before they die. Is that right? I'm sure my maid told me that a long time ago."

Shocked, Mora said, "...Princess. You are a little bit ignorant of the ways of the world. Confession is not something people do, no matter who they may be."

"Is that so?" Nashetania gave a single forceful nod. Then she leaned her head to the side and thought.

"Well in that case, it's alright if I kill him."

The next moment a blade sprung up where Adlet was.

He wasn't able to dodge it and his shoulder was split open. The blade had been so sharp that he didn't even feel any pain. The attack that should have spelled certain death had come his way without hesitation, when it had just looked like Nashetania was waiting motionlessly. He completely couldn't read Nashetania's movements; he was unprepared and had no way to tell whether an attack was coming his way or not.

"There!" Fremy screamed and fired a bullet into the forest. But Goldof, wielding his spear, charged over and intercepted the attack. The bullet hit his armor and blew his body back. However, he resumed his charge the next moment after he landed.

"What is that armor made of?" Fremy was shocked. Not only was the armor special, but Goldof was even more special. Still, at the very least Fremy's gun should have inflicted some kind of damage, even if it was just to his armor.

Goldof lunged forward and Adlet and Fremy jumped apart. Then taking advantage of that situation, Mora grabbed Fremy and Nashetania's rapier aimed for Adlet's heart.

"I'll hold Fremy! Princess, Goldof, you finish him off!" Mora shouted.

But Fremy didn't allow Mora to win, as she scattered some small bombs under her cloak. The force from the explosions stopped Mora in her tracks and the smoke blocked Goldof's vision.

"Why is Fremy interfering?" Goldof muttered.

However, without having to search deeply, Goldof soon narrowed his sights onto Adlet. But in an instant Fremy had loaded another bullet and shot Goldof's foot. The bullet didn't penetrate his armor, but it did destroy his balance and cause him to fall down.

"I'll show you that I can hold these two. Adlet, run!"

Adlet was worried about Fremy, but just as he was about to say he would protect her, he wondered if he should just leave her alone and run. He was exhausted and didn't have many weapons left. So his chances of winning in a one on one encounter were very slim.

"Fremy. I will absolutely hold on. I am the World's Strongest Man!" Adlet shouted as he ran away.

And as he was shouting and fleeing, Fremy smiled just a little.

#

Adlet ran through the foggy forest, heading towards the temple where Hans was.

"You won't get away!"

Nashetania was approaching from behind and he was dodging the successive attacks being unleashed upon him from the ground and the tree trunks.

He could see the temple just ahead of him in the distance. And though at the moment Nashetania was thinking Adlet had left Hans half dead, if he could resolve that misunderstanding then he should be able to avoid a fight.

He tossed a smoke bomb behind him, clouding Nashetania's vision. Then he threw pain-inducing poison darts which stopped her pursuit. Though his intention was to use up all the rest of his few remaining secret weapons, he just hoped he could reach the temple. The battle would end when they met up with Hans.

"Goldof! Mora-san! What are you doing!?" Nashetania shouted behind her. However, there was no response.

As Fremy had declared, she was holding off the two of them. And with that being true, Adlet believed he could successfully get away.

The sun was already starting to set which meant it had been about a whole day since they'd been trapped in the forest. And the entire time had been a long battle. He'd kidnapped Fremy and was pursued by the others. He'd fought with Hans and then quarreled with Chamo. Then things had gotten to the point where Fremy even tried to kill him. Each time he had been injured and now his body was already nearing its limit.

However, this would be the last fight. If he could successfully get away and meet up with Hans that would make Nashetania stop her attacks. Then he and Hans could go help Fremy.

He still didn't know who the seventh was and the method used to make the fog also remained unknown. However, Hans and Fremy had allied themselves with him. And they would be able to stop the fighting and commence discussions.

From all of the smoke bombs he'd thrown in rapid succession, Nashetania had completely lost sight of Adlet. And though Adlet had almost used up all his secret weapons, it wasn't a problem. The temple was right in front of him.

"Hans!" Adlet shouted.

But there was no answer. He couldn't see anyone anywhere around the temple.

"Hans! Are you there? If you're there come out!"

Perhaps he's inside, Adlet thought as he yelled over and over again. However, in the end there was no reply.

"Where did you go!? Hans! Chamo! Where did you go!?"

Adlet looked at the crest on his right hand. All of the petals were present. All of the Six Flowers were still alive. So Hans and Chamo should be alive.

But where did they go? Did they fall into the seventh's trap? Or did Hans suffer to the point of half death by Chamo?

"Even though you were the one who took out Hans-san, you're still looking for someone?"

Nashetania slowly came out from the forest.

"For some reason they went somewhere."

Or could it be that the 7th was Hans and that Hans was silently waiting for Nashetania to kill him.

Nashetania came and attacked, but Adlet jumped up onto the temple, ran across the roof of the temple, and then escaped to the opposite side. He had no chance to replenish his secret weapons.

"Wait!"

Adlet had to run. However, where would he run to? How would he escape? He no longer had any secret weapons left.

#

Adlet desperately ran through the forest as darkness slowly descended upon the trees. His wounds were deep and he had already passed the limits of his fatigue. All of which meant he had already exhausted all of his energy.

"Are you there?!"

Nashetania relentlessly pursued Adlet. He wondered how long he would be able to successfully evade her attacks. Still, he knew he could no longer last for long.

"You're still running?"

He'd already given up on a rendezvous with Hans.

So there was just one option left. To unravel the mystery of the seventh. I will expose the truth to Nashetania and confirm that I'm not the seventh. That is my only choice.

But Adlet didn't know how the fog was made. He could unravel the mystery, but without proof he wouldn't be able to convince Nashetania.

And so Adlet thought about how the fog could have been produced. *The Fog. Fog. Fog. Fog. Fog. Fog.*

With so many thoughts circulating in his mind, Adlet's movements grew sluggish. And in that moment one of Nashetania's blades pierced his side, causing Adlet to fall over and slump down against the trunk of a tree.

"...I finally got you."

From the distant fog, Nashetania slowly drew closer.

"...Nashetania."

As he looked at her face, Adlet recalled the day they had embarked on their journey. The first time he'd seen her Adlet had been shocked. He had never thought the princess would come to him, pretending to be a maid.

At that time he'd thought they had developed a good relationship. And with her he had thought the two of them wouldn't even have to fear The Majin.

Why is such a thing happening? Adlet wondered. Why am I being targeted by the people I should be fighting alongside with? And why am I about to lose my life?"

"...Listen, Nashetania."

"To what?"

"I'm your companion."

Nashetania grinned, and then aimed her rapier at Adlet. The blade extended and pierced through Adlet's ear.

"What nonsense are you saying now?" Nashetania laughed, but her eyes looked like she were staring at some kind of vermin.

So she was a girl that could make a face like that? When they'd met she seemed like a bright and lively girl. But she was also a warrior worthy of being chosen as one of the Six Flowers. So of course there were fangs in her heart.

"You're a fool. However, if you surrender and confess then I could give you a quick death."

"I'm not going to confess. I didn't do anything wrong," Adlet said. But he also understood that she wasn't listening.

When they first met it wasn't like that at all. She had festively joked around. She'd eaten carrots raw and playfully sent blades flying at him. *What did we talk about at that time? Right, the Six Flower Killer. We talked about how we didn't think we could ever become companions with the killer.*

The Six Flower Killer. For a moment he felt a bit uneasy as he thought about that title. However, the flash of a thought disappeared before it could take form.

"It's no use. I won't be fooled by you anymore." Nashetania sighed silently. "You caught us in your trap. You deceived us, hurt us. But now I understand clearly that you're an impostor."

"I'm not lying. You are being deceived. The enemy is using you to try and kill me," said Adlet, but his words didn't seem to reach Nashetania's ears. "I didn't kill my companions. And I didn't set a trap for everyone."

Her rapier was slowly aimed at his heart.

I can probably block it, he thought. If I'm lucky I can probably survive. But Adlet's arms no longer worked.

What would happen as a result of him blocking the attack? He'd just die from the next one, or the one after that. Besides, pain and exhaustion had taken away all of Adlet's strength.

It's cold. Yesterday when I travelled with Fremy it had been so warm, so why is it so cold now?

"I'm sure I just said I won't let you deceive me any further," Nashetania said, as she continued to point the blade of her rapier at Adlet's heart. But Adlet didn't hear her...he was only thinking about how cold it was.

"I'm not deceiving you at all. Listen, Nashetania! I'm not the seventh."

"Wrong. You are the seventh."

The blade extended. The next moment Adlet moved his arms, crossing them and placing them in front of the blade. He could hear the sound of his flesh being ripped apart. But the bones in his arms were able to stop the blade, even though the rapier had completely pierced through his left arm and was barely stopped by his right.

"...Is it cold?" Adlet muttered.

"....It's no use."

Nashetania was pushing the blade, but Adlet pushed back. He forced her back and twisted his arms to the side, making Nashetania lose her balance and stumble.

With the sword still pierced through his left arm, Adlet stood and snapped the rapier. The counterattack was so sudden that it bewildered Nashetania for a moment.

"I'm sorry," he shouted as he rushed forward. He then kicked Nashetania in the face with the bottom of his shoe. Recoiling, she released what was left of her sword and grabbed her face. Then Adlet took another step forward and smashed his heel against her chin.

Immediately after, he turned his back on Nashetania and ran. The energy had returned to his eyes.

Why didn't I notice before?

The answer had been right next to him. It had been so close to him that it was pathetic he didn't notice it until now.

The Illusion Fog Barrier was cold.

"Ugu!" You won't escape!"

With his mouth, Adlet pulled out the blade stuck in his arm. Meanwhile, Nashetania was pursuing behind him, but Adlet continued running without paying her any mind. And though swords were attacking him from the ground and from the sky, Adlet prayed that none of them would hit and just ran straight onward.

He couldn't prove his innocence there. In order to prove it, he would have to run.

"Princess! Are you safe?"

Adlet could hear Goldof's voice coming from far away. Then he faintly saw Mora and Goldof's figures within the fog. He could also see that Mora was carrying Fremy over her shoulder. She was struggling to undo Mora's restraints.

Adlet was happy that Fremy was safe. She had fought well for him and now she was still perfectly alive.

Now, unraveling the mystery of the seventh was the only thing left for Adlet to do.

"Don't worry about me! Pursue Adlet!"

And with that Goldof started his charge, his spear cutting down the trees in his path as he rushed towards Adlet. With his sword, Adlet successfully deflected the attack, but Goldof's giant strength still sent him flying backwards.

I'm grateful though, Adlet thought. Goldof had sent him flying in the direction he wanted to travel. And at the moment even just running was painful.

"Run!" Fremy screamed on Mora's back.

She twisted her body and managed to undo her restraints a bit. Then she turned her body towards Goldof and Nashetania and threw a bomb their way. It stopped them for a moment.

And in that moment Adlet ran. He ran, ran, and continued running.

But in the end Goldof caught him. The giant twisted his arm and threw him down to the ground.

"This is as far as you go Adlet."

Adlet had fallen about ten minutes from the temple, surrounded by Kyoma corpses.

Yesterday when Adlet and the others had seen the Kyoma's explosions he and his three companions ran towards the temple. And now he was in the same place where they had been attacked by the Kyoma, with Adlet eventually breaking through their ranks and running to the temple while Nashetania and the others exterminated them.

"I'm sorry Goldof. I couldn't finish him off." Nashetania said as she rushed over to where Adlet was.

"What are you saying? You chased him down for us."

Goldof tightened his hold on Adlet, even though Adlet lacked the strength to resist.

"You did well Goldof. Now, kill him." Carrying Fremy on her back, Mora also ran over to them.

"No! Stop! Adlet please run!" Fremy shouted while squirming atop Mora's shoulder.

"Princess, Mora-san. Instead of killing him, we should force him to divulge some information. If we kill him, we won't know who the mastermind behind him was."

"No, Goldof. A guy like this will not talk. I fear he is a stubborn man."

"Let go! Let me go Mora!" Fremy struggled and struggled, but she couldn't shake herself free.

From an outsider's perspective it would seem like Adlet had been cornered. However, Adlet was smiling. And the cause for his smile was the figure approaching from behind Mora.

"...Huh?"

The moment she saw that figure Nashetania's rapier slipped out from her hand.

"You're late. Where have you been? And what have you been doing?" Adlet asked.

Finally they could see that the approaching figure was clearly Hans, with Chamo walking behind him.

"Sorry. I was looking for all of you."

Hans hit his head as if he were embarrassed. He seemed to understand that Adlet had wished he hadn't left the temple. *Well, there's no need to criticize him. He did manage to make it just in time.*

"...Huh?.....Huh?"

For a while Nashetania was in total shock. Even Goldof was at a loss. Then, forgetting to even pick up her sword, Nashetania rushed over to Adlet.

"This...this can't...can't..." Tears fell down her face.

With a forced smile, Adlet said, "Nashetania. You're really strong. You were somewhat formidable."

"What is this?" Holding her face, Nashetania started to cry. Goldof then glared over at Mora with Fremy still on her shoulder.

"Mora-san, explain for us." His hand was gripping his spear.

Feigning that she was calm, Mora said, "I'm sorry that I lied. However, if it wasn't for this we wouldn't have been able to corner Adlet."

"Mora-san. You..." Full of anger, Nashetania glared at Mora. "Why did you trick us!?"

"Adlet is the impostor. That fact hasn't changed. My methods are not a problem if it's in order for us to be victorious!" ²

"You're wrong! You lied. You deceived all of us."

With tears on her face, Nashetania grabbed Mora. However, Goldof soon released Adlet and forced his way between the two of them. In the confusion, Fremy escaped from Mora's shoulder and rushed over to Adlet. She lent him her shoulder and slowly helped him stand.

"...Hey," Adlet said as he unsteadily walked with Fremy's support. He had spoken quietly, but everyone paid attention. "What do you think of the world's strongest means?"

Fremy directed him over to a tree and after resting his weight onto the bark, Adlet slowly lowered himself to the ground. Fremy then reached into one of her breast pockets, pulled out some needle and thread, and started to stitch up Adlet's wounds.

"Power, skill, wisdom, heart, and luck. The world's strongest possesses all of these things." Adlet said and then looked at his companions with a smile. "So the answer is simple. I'm the World's Strongest. Could anyone other than myself have managed to get this far?"

Mora was confused and panicking.

"Well, things will be alright soon. We'll defeat the seventh."³

² それは何も変わらぬ事実じゃ。勝利を得るためならば、手段は問題ではない！

³ そろそろ、いいだろ。七目人を倒しても This is a sentence fragment so I had to extrapolate what the full sentence would have been. However, I may have been mistaken.

After hearing that Mora looked astonished. Nashetania and Goldof both looked like they had been struck by lightning. Chamo was a bit surprised. And Fremy looked at him, with an eye full of anticipation. Then Hans grinned.

"And I'm going to expose the seventh's trap."

Part Two

Adlet proceeded to reveal his theory.

First he went over the things he'd talked about with Hans and Fremy. Specifically, that the method to activate the barrier they heard from Private First Class Rowen had been a lie, and that the seventh had activated the barrier after Adlet had opened the temple doors. Several times during his explanation, Adlet had to stop due to the pain since Fremy was treating his wounds without any anesthesia.

The only people listening intently to him were Nashetania and Goldof. Mora and Chamo seemed to be aware of his theory already, so perhaps Hans had told them.

When he'd finished with the first half of his idea, a long painful exhale slipped out of his mouth.

"Meow. We don't mind if we do this after you've been fixed up. Or would you like someone to take your place instead?" Hans asked.

"Don't joke around. You seem like you want to steal the highlights of my story for yourself," Adlet said as he showed a calm smile.

"Mora can you let him continue?" Fremy asked.

Cold sweat was visible on her forehead and neck. "Wha, what are you saying?"

"If you are the seventh then I think it will be time for you to surrender soon."

"Don't say stupid things." Mora then turned her attention to Adlet. "Adlet. Your theory doesn't hold water. There isn't a way to produce the fog. It was a powerful barrier that made the fog here."

Adlet waved his hand towards Mora to get her to stop talking. He already knew what she wanted to say.

"But there is someone. There is only one Saint in the world who can create mist, right?"

"...You're an idiot," Mora groaned.

Looking at her, Adlet heaved a massive sigh. He then looked over to Hans and tried to look tough, but even talking was quite painful. ¹

"Mora. Before you said that I didn't know the power of the Saints, right? But I say this back to you. All of you Saints don't know the power of science. That's because the power of the Saints surpasses that of science. However, even though for all of you it may be nothing more than a crude and inferior thing, science is indeed incredible."

¹ ハンスには強がってみせたが、喋ることすら相当に辛い

"...Science?" Mora craned her neck to the side. It seemed like she didn't really even understand what the word meant.

"First of all do you know what fog is? The water vapor in the air solidifies and makes fine particles. The air you breathe out in winter that turns white and the clouds floating in the sky follow the same principle."

As Adlet explained he recalled what his teacher Atro Spyker had said. In order to make secret weapons Adlet learned the leading scientific knowledge from Atro. He learned the principles behind the burning of fire, the principles of the effects of poisons, all the way to the laws of motion governing gases and liquids. If he didn't learn those things then he would never have managed to reach an answer.

Yet at the time he had wondered what use learning that kind of stuff could have.

"As for the air, the higher the atmospheric temperature, the more water vapor the air could contain. And if the temperature suddenly dropped, the water vapor in the air would return to a liquid and become fine particles floating in the air. Is that clear so far?"

"Not at all," Chamo said.

Adlet made a bitter smile. "For now just understand that when the temperature is warmish and it suddenly becomes cool, fog will form."

"Got it." Unexpectedly, Chamo agreed without protest.

"The humidity in this forest is always quite high, due to being right next to the ocean and the moisture that the ocean winds carry over. So if the temperature in this forest were to suddenly drop, fog would form in an instant."

"Wait," Mora said. *She's always interrupting.* "How would the temperature suddenly drop? Also it's impossible for the Saint of Ice and the Saint of Snow to extend a large-scale barrier."

"You're close-minded, Mora. The temperature didn't drop. It increased."

Mora went silent for a moment. Then as if she'd noticed something, she lifted her head.

"In reality, this was their grand plan and the scope of it had been extraordinary. Indeed in order to trick me into initiating their trap they used nature itself."

"...The Saint of the Sun, Leura," Fremy murmured. *That's exactly right.*

Around the time he embarked on his trip, he'd heard about the Six Flower Killer. The expert archer Matola, the Knight Foudelka, the Saint of Ice Asley, and the Saint of the Sun Leura. All of those names belonged to well-known warriors who had been assassinated one by one.

But when he'd heard that information, he felt the one regarding The Saint of the Sun Leura was out of place.

Though she was a Saint who possessed massive power, she shouldn't be able to fight at her advanced age. So as a result he had wondered why the Six Flower Killer would kill her.

Afterwards, Adlet met up with Fremy and when he learned that she was the Six Flower killer, Adlet had asked, *"Leura too...Did you also kill the Saint of the Sun?"*

At the time Fremy answered, *"The Saint of the Sun? Leura?...I don't know anything about that."*

Of course Fremy had been betrayed by her Kyoma companions half a year prior. And she hadn't killed any Six Flower candidates after that. Since Leura had only gone missing a little over a month ago, that meant Fremy had not taken part in the killing of the Saint of the Sun.

And if that were so, then who did?

"I will ask you one thing, Mora. With the Saint of the Sun's power is it possible for the temperature in the vicinity to increase all at once? It's probably possible. She's famed to have the power to incinerate castles."

"...It's...possible."

"Would it be possible even as she got older?"

"Leura's legs have become weak and she can't move from her easy chair. However, the power of the God of the Sun has no connection to the deterioration of the body." Instead of Mora who was hesitating, Fremy spoke.

Adlet nodded, and then he entered the core of his theory. "I will now tell you about the trap the seventh used. First the seventh abducted Leura and forced her to cooperate. Probably they took one of her family members hostage or something like that. Under duress, Leura raised the temperature in this entire area. Perhaps the change took close to one month." Adlet looked over his companions.

"You should all remember what it was like when we first came here. We thought it was strangely warm right? That was Leura's power."

Each of the companions recalled the events from yesterday, then they nodded.

"Next, companions of the seventh attacked the fortress and decided to kill everyone inside. Then those companions pretended to be soldiers. Or perhaps the soldiers in the fortress may have originally been the seventh's companions. I don't know which is the case. Next, the soldiers told us about the existence of the Illusion Fog Barrier, but lied about how to activate it."

"What if someone among us had known the real method to activate the barrier?" Mora asked.

"Then their plan would have stopped at that time. However, the chance of that was low. The king that made the fortress was secretive and didn't even tell the existence of the barrier to anyone but to a limited group of people."

"...So?"

"The seventh used the Kyoma to lure us to the temple. Then when I opened the door they sent a signal. After that sign, the companion Kyoma near the seventh killed Leura. The sent signal was the shape-shifting Kyoma near the temple. Their laughter probably indicated that it was time to eliminate the Saint of the Sun. And if Leura died, the powers of the sun that she had used would be extinguished. Then the temperature would suddenly drop and fog would be created. And so we were thoroughly mistaken about the fact that the barrier had been activated."

When Adlet had entered the temple he had felt a chill run down his back. That wasn't a hallucination; the temperature had really been dropping. However, he had never expected that the change in temperature was a part of the enemy's trap.

"After that the seventh nonchalantly approached the altar. And taking advantage of our confusion, they actually activated the barrier. I don't need to explain what happened after that. I was suspected and the real seventh thought it was good to wait patiently for it to be decided that I was the imposter."

"Wait! What proof do you have?! This is all nothing more than supposition!"

"I'm still in the middle of my explanation."

Fremy had already finished treating him, so Adlet tried to stand. However, Hans stopped him.

"Leave it to me. It's alright if you just explain."

Adlet squatted down with his back against the trunk of the tree. As for Hans, he went to search each of the Kyoma's corpses laid on the ground.

"Well then, that brings us to the final problem. Where did the seventh's companions hide Leura's corpse? Leura wasn't killed that far from the temple because she and her killer had to have been at a distance where the Kyoma's voice, acting as a signal, could reach them.

"They wouldn't have wandered around carrying the corpse because there was a possibility they would run into Mora, Hans, or Chamo. And even if they buried it, there would be fear that it would be discovered after all because Chamo is here."

Using the Kyoma within her stomach was one of Chamo's abilities. And with it she would have used worm or lizard Kyoma to search the ground and they may have located the corpse.

"There aren't many places to hide, even in a vast forest. No, rather none exist except for one."

"Meow, I found it," Hans said as he pointed to one of the Kyoma corpses.

It was about five meters long and resembled the form of a crocodile. One wouldn't know if they didn't look closely, but the Kyoma's stomach was faintly swollen.

"Hans, cut it for me."

Adlet gulped. The fated time had come. The only proof that could prove Adlet's innocence might reside there. And so whether or not his deductions were correct, they would all know once that Kyoma was cut open.

"The only place to hide a corpse is within the corpse of a Kyoma."

Hans drew his sword and sliced open the crocodile's stomach. And an old woman's corpse, covered in the Kyoma's digestive fluids, tumbled out.

"Now just to confirm, Mora. I'm not wrong in thinking this old woman is Leura, The Saint of the Sun, correct?" Hans asked.

Mora timidly approached the old woman, and then sank down to the ground.

"...It's Leura-sama. This person is Leura-sama."

Adlet exhaled in relief, and Hans took over the speaking.

"Well then, is there anyone who still thinks that Adlet is the impostor, meow? If so, then I'd like you to explain why this old woman died here, meow."

Adlet had thought there shouldn't be anyone, but then Mora stood.

"Even this is a trap! Adlet arranged this in advance so that he could claim this to be the truth!"

Mora was still claiming that Adlet was the impostor; however no one was listening to her.

"If that were the case then Adlet would have revealed this reasoning a long time ago. How many times do you think he came close to death before arriving at this point?"

"Um..." Mora hung her head, continuing to think of a rebuttal. But she was the only person doubting Adlet. The tables had turned. Now the seventh was the one cornered.

Then in a murmur, Mora said, "...I made a mistake. Adlet wasn't the impostor."

Bearing the pain, Adlet heaved a sigh. The power left his body and his back slid down the trunk of the tree.

He thought about pushing himself up with his fists, but in the end he just didn't feel like it.

"From the beginning you've been wrong, right? I'm not the seventh."

The prospect of his victory had rested on thin ice. And he hadn't believed Leura's corpse was hidden there. It could have simply been buried nondescript in the ground. Or it was even possible that she had been killed outside the barrier. Until the very end Adlet had trusted things to fate.

Nevertheless he had won. He had completely exposed the seventh's plan.

Who in the world could have managed to reach this point other than me?

"Hey, who killed the old woman?" Chamo asked.

"It was probably that crocodile-type Kyoma. It killed Leura, ate her, and then died here."

"Wait. More importantly who in the world is the seventh?" Mora shouted. Her question was answered with silence from everyone.

Even Adlet still didn't know who the seventh was. He had been able to expose all the details of the trap, but he wasn't able to get proof about the seventh's identity.

However, it seemed like a discussion was no longer necessary.

"Mora-san. Do you understand the position you're in right now?" Nashetania asked. Her words were full of a silent anger. She picked up her fallen sword and pointed it at Mora.

"Fremy-san, please don't move away from Adlet-san. Goldof, do not let Mora-san escape."

Taking a step back, Mora shouted, "Wait, Princess! It's not me. What proof do you have?"

"Sure we don't have proof, but are you saying it's someone other than you? You can't possibly intend to say something that the impostor is Fremy-san right?"

I should probably stop her, Adlet thought. There was no proof. But who could it be other than Mora? He believed Fremy wasn't the impostor. The same with Nashetania. Hans had cooperated with him to expose the seventh's plan. And he didn't suspect Chamo from the start. Nor Goldof. It seemed very unlikely that a man as loyal as Goldof had betrayed them.

Without a doubt it was Mora. But the moment he thought that, Chamo said, "It's not Obachan."

Everyone looked at Chamo.

"Chamo has this," she added and turned up her shirt to show them her stomach. A stone slab had been inserted into her belt, but Adlet had no idea what it was.

"After Mora-obachan left, Chamo broke the temple floor and tried digging beneath it. After that Chamo found a big box with a sacred sword and stone slab within."

Hans then took over Chamo's explanation. "The person who made this barrier had prepared remarkably well. The altar that activated the barrier, they created a spare in advance. Since it was buried considerably deep it was difficult to dig out. Adlet, you didn't enter the temple again right? There was a giant hole in the floor."

Adlet shook his head. Nashetania was chasing him and so he hadn't been able to do much but run away from her.

"Hehehe, Chamo found it."

"Well, whatever was under the ground, I was the only one who hit on the idea," Hans argued.

"However, Chamo was the one who found it."

"But I was the one who thought of it, Meow."

"Fight over the credit later. What's written on that slab?" Adlet asked.

Hans and Chamo both grinned at the same time.

"There are two slabs. The first was one on the altar. On the other hand, this one here wasn't written in sacred writing, but with words even I can read."

At that moment everyone directed their attention to Hans. So, no one noticed if one of the seven's facial expression changed.

"In order to activate the barrier again, remove the treasured sword and the broken slab, and after that you must repeat the activation steps. That is, grip the treasured sword, spread blood, and break the slab at the same time as you say the prescribed words."

"...Huh?" Goldof asked. But the dumb sound didn't seem to have come from him.

Adlet also didn't believe his ears. Next he doubted his memory. And in the end he doubted the authenticity of the slab.

Because surely he remembered what happened after he and the others had set foot in the temple, but before Chamo had come along...

"Meow? Well who broke the slab? Meow. I don't know."

"When Chamo came, the slab had already been broken. Who broke it?"

Adlet searched his memory...

"The barrier's been activated. I can't believe it. Who did this?" Nashetania had said, forcing the words out of her lips.

"Sorry, but I have no idea what happened," Adlet had responded while shaking his head.

"At any rate we have to lower the barrier," Goldof said. *"Excuse me."*

The first person to touch it was Goldof. He pulled out the treasured sword and tried to deactivate the barrier.

Adlet was the next person to touch it. He ran the blade over his hand and spread his blood, then tried deactivating the barrier. And after that...

Nashetania had grabbed the sword, said various phrases and finally, as if tired of waiting, bashed the pedestal and slab.

"Give that to me for a second," Adlet had then interrupted when they realized nothing was happening.

"Barrier dissolve! Barrier dispel! Stop! Stop the fog! I am the owner of the barrier."

And that had been when the slab broke.

"This is good, Mora-obachan. You were about to be killed."

"...I'm having trouble following. What do you mean?"

Chamo smiled at Mora who seemed flustered and unable to grasp the situation.

"Adlet, you saw it right? Who broke the slab," Hans asked, but Adlet couldn't answer. "Meow, do you know Fremy?" Hans then asked to Fremy instead.

Without hesitation she answered, "Nashetania."

Nashetania took a step back, a terrified expression on her face. She was at a loss for words and slightly shook her head as she desperately pleaded her innocence.

"At that time... the slab....b...but are you saying I intended to activate the barrier..."

"It's the princess? That's a surprise. I was thinking Goldof was more likely, Meow."

Hans pulled out his sword and Chamo touched her foxtail grass to her mouth. But Goldof stood in their way and stopped the two.

It was some kind of trap. If not, then something was wrong. There was no way she was the culprit, Adlet thought as he searched the memories of the days he'd spent with her.

Nashetania hadn't displayed any suspicious behavior. He recalled the time she pretended to be a maid and visited him. Then the time when they were selected as Heroes of the Six Flowers and embarked on their journey together. After that he thought of the time when they saved the villagers that were under attack. Next the one time they'd separated, and after that when they reunited. He also thought about when she'd considered Fremy as an enemy and the battle that ensued after that.

And after that battle they had headed to the temple which was being bombed.

"...Ah..." a scream-like sound escaped from Adlet's mouth.

On the way towards the temple the four had been stopped by Kyoma. And in the chaos of the battle, Nashetania had said, "Adlet-san. Please head to the temple. We'll handle this."

Why didn't I notice it before? There was one single important prerequisite for the trap to work. And that was for one of the Heroes of the Six Flowers to manage to reach the area in front of the temple. Nashetania's words had spurred Adlet into motion, and when he arrived at the temple he fell into the seventh's trap.

"Haven't you just been accusing one person after another? Well, rest assured, I will protect the princess."

Goldof was giving off a murderous intent from his entire body as he guarded Nashetania behind him.

"The princess? It can't be...." Flustered, Mora was unable to do anything.

Hans and Chamo slowly advanced towards Nashetania, while Fremy took out her rifle and readied it. On the other side Nashetania drew her sword and urgently looked Adlet's way.

"Adlet-san. Please say something. I am not the seventh."

It was wrong, she wasn't the impostor. Adlet tried to say that, however, what rushed out of his mouth was entirely different.

"It can't be. Is this true, Nashetania?"

"...Adlet-san."

The moment she heard his words, Nashetania's expression suddenly changed. The girl that was afraid and seeking help had changed to a lifeless and expressionless girl.

Then she smiled sweetly. It was the same as they'd first met; an elegant and cheerful smile.

"I yield," she said.

"What?" Adlet asked back.

Nashetania sheathed her sword and stretched both of her hands out to the sides.

"Don't you get it? I yield. That means I surrender."

Part Three

Everyone was speechless and couldn't move an inch.

Nashetania's expression and indifferent way of speaking had taken everyone by surprise. And yet no one could do anything except stare at her.

"...Princess. What are you saying?"

"What I'm saying, Goldof, is that I'm the seventh."

Nashetania tapped the shoulder of the petrified Goldof, as if to say, 'thank you for everything.'

"I'm sorry," Nashetania said, then passed by the side of Goldof and stood at the center of the temple. "Maybe I could have held out a bit more. But with Adlet-san as he is now, it would probably be useless, no matter what I said."

She then looked over at each of their faces.

"I made a mistake. I'd known about the spare ritual equipment, but I didn't know that the method for activating the barrier was written on it. My preparation was insufficient. And I didn't even defeat one person, even though I initially thought I could get rid of two people at least."

Nashetania was calm. She wasn't timid, apologetic, nor flustered.

"The cause of my defeat was probably that I lacked assertiveness. Though there were multiple options, such as approaching Adlet and attacking him by surprise or having Goldof finish him off, I overlooked them all. At any rate, for part of the way my plan had gone very well."

Her words were entering Adlet's ears, but they weren't reaching his brain.

"Hans-san, in the beginning I thought that you would perhaps be the biggest nuisance of an enemy. Since then I formulated many ways to frame you and then kill you...But it was all useless. It's disappointing. Well at least I was right about you being the most powerful enemy. And I bet if you weren't here I wouldn't have lost."

Laughing, Nashetania took another glance at everyone.

"What's wrong? Everyone got silent."

When Adlet saw her expression he thought that she may not be the enemy after all. She looked so unashamed. Perhaps she even had thought that trapping Adlet had been the correct thing to do.

"...Wha..." Mora managed to choke out.

"Why did you try to kill us, no, if you really intended to kill us...then does that mean you allied with The Majin and intended to destroy the world?"

Mora was so shocked she couldn't speak normally. And seeing Mora in that way, Nashetania's expression darkened slightly.

"Really, doing all of this might not have been necessary. I might have revealed everything to you and requested your cooperation. But now all of that is meaningless."

Goldof dropped down to his knees at Nashetania's feet. "Princess! Please tell me! What in the world are you trying to do?! I will follow you."

Nashetania looked down at Goldof and smiled bitterly his way.

"Really Goldof. I had thought you would join me. If you hadn't said anything and silently listened to what I had to say then I would have told you the truth. But you..." She stopped halfway and put her hand to her mouth. Then she giggled cruelly. "Could you possibly be suggesting..."

Something had probably happened between Goldof and her. But whatever it was, it didn't matter.

"But Princess, Chamo wants to know. Why did you want to kill Chamo and the others?"

"Right, right that's what we're talking about." Nashetania touched her chest and in a sincere voice said, "I desire real peace. I want to create a world where The Majin, the Kyoma and humans can live together without fighting. With that in mind, I executed this plan."

Adlet couldn't say anything. For starters, he didn't even understand what she meant.

"I don't have any resentment towards any of you. But for me, reviving The Majin was necessary. So to do that I had to eliminate the Heroes of the Six Flowers at all costs."

"For what? I don't know what you mean. What are you saying, Princess?" Mora asked as she grabbed her head.

But Nashetania ignored her and continued, "I have a request for all of you. Can you withdraw from this battle? I will deal with the revived Majin. I won't let it destroy the human world because I love both humans and Kyoma equally."

"Princess, I beg you. Please speak in a way that we can understand."

"I'll speak simply then. My objective is to reform the Kyoma and have them make peace with humans."

Adlet didn't understand her reason, and to him she was just saying nonsense. Despite that, he listened to what she had to say. Maybe it was because of the air they were inhaling in that place, or maybe it was her charisma.

"Meo, meow. Make peace and the world will become peaceful?" Even Hans was overwhelmed by what Nashetania was saying.

"Yes, it will become peaceful. I'm not saying there won't be danger. And in order to realize this peace there will be some sacrifices. However, it would really be just a few sacrifices."

"...How many?" Fremy asked.

"I expect the human sacrifices to be around 500,000 people," Nashetania said it in an extremely natural way with a voice full of confidence.

I can't understand, Adlet thought. He couldn't understand what Nashetania was trying to do, nor what she was thinking. And looking at her now, he felt that her lovely appearance was that of a monster.

"...Hans, Fremy, Mora, Chamo," Adlet said, facing his shocked companions. "...Kill her!"

Spurred by the command, Hans drew his sword and ran. Chamo stuck the foxtail grass down her throat and vomited out Kyoma. And Mora balled her fists and rushed towards Nashetania.

The first to make contact was Mora, who with a single strike, smashed Nashetania's face with her fist.

However....

"So persuasion was useless after all."

With her head cracked open, Nashetania stood as if nothing had happened. Then her body, armor and clothes crumbled and transformed into a mud-like state.

"That's too bad." The voice didn't come from the mud that used to be Nashetania, but from the surrounding forest. "Goodbye Goldof. It's unfortunate that we couldn't travel together."

"What is this?"

"A Kyoma's skill. And a considerably high level Kyoma's skill at that," Adlet said.

"And as for you Fremy-san, I think you might be able to understand me."

"Meow! She's still close."

"We shall meet again."

Hans went to pursue Nashetania, running in the direction that the voice came from. As did Chamo with her Kyoma alongside her.

"Fremy! I'm entrusting Adlet to you!" Mora said, and then also rushed into the forest.

And after a while the paralyzed Goldof followed the rest and ran in that direction, leaving only Adlet and Fremy at the temple.

"...It, It can't be. It was Nashetania? I can't believe it," Adlet groaned.

Pain attacked his body as soon as he started to feel at ease after the seventh's true identity was revealed. Fremy leaned against the tree as well and sat down beside him.

"Don't talk Adlet. You're overexerting yourself."

"Overdoing things is my...specialty." Adlet laughed towards Fremy, whose face was above his head.

"You're bleeding too much. Wait a moment. I've got a little bit of strong medicine on me."

"You've become extremely kind...You could have been this nice from the beginning."

"I said don't talk," Fremy said as she searched within her cloak.

While watching her search, Adlet recalled when he first met her. The first time he saw her, he had thought she was beautiful. And then he felt like he wanted to protect her. However there was no reason for that impulse, he just felt that way. And even now that he knew she was the daughter of a Kyoma and the Six Flower Killer, that feeling hadn't changed.

"...Hey, Fremy. Do you care about me?"

Her hand searching within her cloak stopped. She then stared at Adlet and replied, "I hate you." After the words came out Fremy averted her gaze, but her words didn't sound bad.

"Why?"

"When I'm with you, I want to live."

Hearing those words made Adlet smile.

I won't let you die, he tried to reply back, but the words wouldn't come out of his throat and he couldn't move his tongue well.

"...Adlet!"

His vision suddenly narrowed. Fremy slapped his cheek and seemed to be shouting something, but the words didn't reach his ears.

"...don't....your eyes" ¹

He couldn't hear her very well and he was feeling terribly sleepy.

Don't worry, I'm just going to close my eyes for a little bit. That too Adlet tried to say, but his lips didn't move.

At that moment Adlet felt something soft touch his lips. A stinging liquid was poured into his mouth, traveled down his throat and entered his stomach.

Then Adlet's consciousness fell into darkness.

¹。。。めよ。。。ないで。。。 Adlet is losing consciousness and so is hearing in fragments. However without the Kanji , I could only guess as to what Fremy was saying.



Epilogue

When Adlet opened his eyes it was extremely bright. It was morning and sunlight was shining down on his cheek.

And the fog had cleared.

"..."

Adlet looked around his surroundings. He was within the temple and the sunlight was shining in through the broken door.

"Are you awake?" a voice said from the other side of the sunlight. When Adlet turned his face in that direction he saw Mora sitting by his side.

"It's unfortunate that I wasn't Fremy, huh?"

Was that sarcasm? Adlet wondered. However, he certainly would have been happier with Fremy at his side instead of Mora.

Adlet looked at his body. A dark green compress had been spread over his skin. But he didn't think that Fremy had used such a tool when she treated him.

"It is a medicinal plant that contains the spirit of the mountains. With a wound like that it should take two days to recover."

"Really?"

"It's the power of the mountains. You ought to believe in my power."

Adlet sat up. It was fairly painful, but he could definitely move. And just yesterday he had believed that he would no longer fight again. *The power of the Saints is unbelievable.*

"Adlet, I'm sorry." Mora suddenly placed both of her hands on the floor and lowered her head.

"I didn't realize that you were genuine. It was a complete failure on my part. It's because I had acted like a fool that these injuries..."

"What has passed has passed. It's more important that you apologize to everyone else."

Adlet's words made Mora lift her head back up. And when she did, he heard Hans' voice come from the direction of his feet.

"She already placed her hands on the ground and apologized to us too."

"Is that so...Well then it's alright."

Adlet again lay sprawled on the floor. It seemed like only Mora and Hans were in the temple so he wondered what happened to his other companions. And Nashetania.

"Nashetania got away. I'm sorry, meow," Hans said.

"Is everyone safe?"

"Of course. Chamo, Fremy, and Goldof are outside."

Adlet exhaled in relief. If everyone was safe, then for the time being things were alright. They had managed to overcome that dreadful trap without losing a single person. That was a satisfactory achievement¹.

"Adlet. I shudder to think about what would have happened if you weren't here. We were all deceived by Nashetania... who knows how many would have been killed."

"Well, keep on trusting me more from now on then."

"...The World's strongest huh? Normally I would be on the verge of laughing at such a claim, but you are different. You really have done well."

¹ The Japanese reads "Military achievement" but though Adlet and the Heroes are fighting a war, it seems odd to speak about them as a military.

"Meow, meow, meow," Hans came and cut in. "Aren't you going to thank me?"

"You're right. You did exert yourself."

"Meow! What's with the different attitude?" Hans vented in dissatisfaction. "I did a lot. In the beginning I was the one who noticed you were innocent. The two of us then took down Chamo. And I was the one who persuaded Chamo and made her search the ground."

"I, I got it. You did well too. Thank you, I appreciate it."

"That's better."

Hans really had come through for him, Adlet thought as the two of them argued back and forth. Because he had been able to see through the situation and find the truth, Adlet was still alive. And of the two of them, he had been the one who chased after Nashetania in the end.

"Hans, you were probably aware of Nashetania's trap right?"

"Yeah, but only half of it. I never thought of where the corpse was hidden," Hans said, with a face that didn't seem to be lying.

From the bottom of his heart, Adlet was glad Hans wasn't the enemy. "Hans. You're really incredible. I've never seen another person as reliable as you."

"Hmm?"

Hans suddenly started acting differently than normal. His face turned red and he looked around, scratching his head.

"I'll be relying on you from here on out as well."

"Meow, meow. It is embarrassing to be praised so much."

"What's with this guy?" Mora muttered. Adlet didn't really know either.

Chamo then entered the temple.

"Chamo, how's Goldof?"

"Not good. No matter what Chamo said to him, he didn't reply."

"This is going to be a problem for us later on if we can't force him to pull himself together. Our battle still hasn't begun."

The mood Adlet had been in up till then vanished after hearing those words. She was exactly right. Their objective was to defeat The Majin.

Adlet sat up, and then stood.

"What? You can stand Adlet?"

"I'm going to breathe the outside air for a bit."

There was pain, but if he just walked it wouldn't be a problem. And so Adlet left Hans and the others and went outside.

Bathed in the morning light, Adlet walked through the salt pillars. That was when he saw Goldof crouching and leaning against one of the pillars. But thinking he should leave him alone, Adlet left that place.

He soon found the person he was looking for. She was standing in the forest, a slight distance away from the temple.

"...You're awake?" Fremy said curtly. Her demeanor from yesterday had completely changed back to her usual coldness.

"Yeah."

He stood beside her and wondered what he should say. But ever since he saw her face, nothing came to mind.

"It's unfortunate that Nashetania is the seventh."

"Why do you say that?"

"You liked her didn't you?"

"Why are you saying that?" Adlet asked with a frown. It wasn't that he had felt anything special towards her. But in his own way he had thought of her as someone he got along with, so unfortunately that thinking was what he considered regrettable. ²

"I'm sorry, but don't talk so much." Fremy then looked away. Her attitude confused Adlet; it was nothing like what she'd been like yesterday when she had worked so hard to protect him.

"I really don't know how I should talk with you or how I should face myself."

"..."

"So I want some time."

Adlet sighed. "I understand. Well, I want to ask you two things."

²残念といえば残伝だが。

Fremy nodded.

"Will you come with us? And have you given up on wanting to fight alone?"

"I could say yes, and that I've already given up on fighting alone, but you probably wouldn't consider those valid answers."

You're right. I won't take those as answers, Adlet thought. And then he asked, "Is it true that when you're with me you want to live?"

Fremy looked down to the ground and her face turned red. Then looking at him with an eye full of resentment, she just barely nodded.

"Let's give it our all. We'll beat The Majin, and we'll all survive."

Fremy nodded. Then as if she were saying that was enough talk, or something like that, she turned away.

Then at that moment Adlet saw a person approaching the temple from the direction of the fortress.

"What's wrong Adlet?" Fremy asked. But soon she too noticed the person.

A girl was approaching. Short-statured and clad in iron armor, she jogged over to them, making a lot of noise as she moved.

Noticing the sound, Mora and the others came out of the temple. Goldof also raised his head and looked at the girl.

"Ah, um, I'm sorry."

The girl lowered her head in a deep bow. She was wearing small glasses, seemed gentle, and timid like a small animal. Her thick armor sadly didn't suit her at all.

"...Rolonia?" Adlet asked.

The girl raised her head. And when she realized who he was, her face suddenly lit up.

"Ad-kun! Long time no see! So you were chosen after all."

"Long time no see...that's true, but..." Adlet hesitated.

The girl then approached for a handshake and though Adlet was confused, he accepted it.

"...Who is this girl?" Fremy asked from behind him.

Suddenly the girl let go of his hand and noticed her surroundings. She then dropped her head again.

"I'm...I'm sorry for not introducing myself sooner." The girl...Rolonia, kept bowing her head again and again. "I'm the Saint of Fresh Blood, Rolonia Manchetta! I'm sorry for being late!"

"Rolonia, Why are you here?" Mora asked.

The girl raised her head and looked over to Mora. "Mora-san, I'm late and I'm really sorry. But when I tried to meet up with all of you the fog came out and I couldn't get closer."

"But that's not what I mean..."

"Um...I know that I'm not strong enough to be a Hero of the Six Flowers, but I will do my best."

Adlet gulped, his spine stiffened, and for a moment he even felt as if his feet were wobbling beneath him.

"Can you show us proof?" Mora asked.

"Ye...Yes. Here it is; my proof that I'm a Hero of the Six Flowers." As she spoke, Rolonia removed her chest plate and showed them a crest around her collar. It was the same as the one Adlet and the other companions had.

A genuine crest of the Six Flowers.

"Um, I'm sorry, but there's been something on my mind for a while now," Rolonia said as she looked over the shuddering companions.

"Why are there seven of us?"

To Rolonia's question, no one could answer.

#

Now Adlet understood that the battle with Nashetania had been nothing more than a skirmish. The real battle was finally about to begin.

Afterword

For those who read my previous work "The Fighting Librarian series" it's been a long time. For those who haven't, it's nice to meet you. My name is Ishio Yamagata.

What did you think of "The Heroes of the Six Flowers?" I hope that we can build a long-term relationship in the future.

There was a long gap after I concluded my previous work and I worried and troubled many people. I plan to do my best not to have another gap like that from now on.

For a relatively long time I thought I had lost sight of myself. However, recently I have come to think whether or not that was actually the case. At any rate I probably have no choice but to write. Did I take a slight step forward? Or am I taking a step back?

Current Events

By nature I'm good with the heat and weak with the cold, so when it becomes summer I get worried about air conditioner sickness. But this year due to the lack of electricity, every place held back on air-conditioning. So I was able to pass my days more healthily than I would have in a typical year.

Even so these days I was afflicted by too much fanning, caught a cold and was down for 3 days.

The next day I recovered so I took a cold shower and then the cold returned which wasted yet another day. Perhaps there was nothing that could be done about this unlikely event.

I'm relatively genuinely worried.

I plan to donate a portion of the royalties from this work to the municipal group "Fukushima Decontamination Commission" undergoing a removal of the radioactive material at Fukushima.

I only have a small sum of funds, but to be able to support the reconstruction just a little bit is the most important thing.

And last are my thanks. To Miyagi-san who drew the illustrations for me, I truly thank you. For Mr. T. in charge of editing this volume, this time too I'm sorry for troubling you. And to everyone at the editing department, you helped me out a lot.

And to all my readers, let's meet again.

With best regards,

Yamagata Ishio

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